

The Motherhood of God

Genesis 1:27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

^{NRS} **Job 38:1** Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: ² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. ⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its measurements-- surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ⁸ "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?-- ⁹ when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band,

^{NRS} **Matthew 23:37** "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

^{NRS} **Romans 16:13** Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother-- a mother to me also.

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I'll just go ahead and tell you right now that I have a problem with Mother's Day. I'm of at least two minds about it, maybe even more than that. I loved my mother. It was important to me- and to her – that I honor her with a gift expressing my love and appreciation on Mother's Day – and I have the scar to prove it. I was in my early teens before I began to consider the idea that she wasn't perfect. Like most teenagers, I was certain that there were times when my mother just had no clue when it came to understanding the real life that I was trying to deal with. And so, the words, "No, you may not," were to me an obvious expression of how parts of her brain were beginning to fossilize. I later came to realize that the "No" often wasn't because she didn't understand, but because she did understand. Later in life, I developed a more objective view of my mother, seeing her graces and her warts, and loving her even though it turned out that she really wasn't perfect. I suspect that there is a lot about all of this that's pretty typical of many of us.

So, what's the problem with Mother's Day? I worry that sometimes it's used to perpetuate the old sexist characterizations of women that has relegated them to the kitchen, the bedroom, and the children's nursery. And it certainly doesn't do anything to express the value of women who are not, for whatever reason, mothers. Perhaps I'm being inappropriately sensitive about those issues and I'm certainly willing to hear whether women find this to be the case.

My other problem is that I've seen Mother's Day abused in worship. Since Mother's Day falls on a Sunday, and since scripture speaks highly of some – but not all – mothers, I've experienced some church services where it seemed like mothers and motherhood were being worshipped, not our Lord and Savior. To avoid falling into that trap, let's take a look at motherhood as an aspect of God.

First, we need to think about God and gender. We have a hard time picturing something that we can't see. If we can't use one or more of our senses to experience something, we have a much harder time imagining it or relating to it in some way. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Well, spirit is a little difficult to picture in our minds. It's much easier to think of God as a much larger, more powerful, eternal version of ourselves. So, when Michelangelo painted the Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, God is shown as a large, muscular, gray bearded man. Scripture sometimes describes God in human terms, as well. Genesis 3:8 says that Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden."

While we tend to picture God in our image, it's important to remember that we are made in God's image. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." If we are created male and female - and we are created in God's image, then the implication is that God is either without gender and blessed us with a bit of additional creative artistry - or God encompasses both genders in some way. While God is most often referred to in male terms, that's certainly

not always the case. In the thirty-second chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses sings a long song about the relationship between God and his people and sometimes refers to God with feminine images. Moses criticizes the people saying, “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.” (Deut. 32:18) Bearing and giving birth are feminine images. More than that, they are images of motherhood.

In the book of Job, Job has suffered one calamity after another. His so-called friends tell him that he must have really sinned badly to deserve so much suffering. Job, on the other hand, knows that he’s been a faithful and righteous servant of God. He’s perplexed and angry about his problems and he wants an answer from God about all that he has suffered. Then, in chapter thirty-eight, God begins to answer Job. God asks over and over, “Were you around when I created the world? In verses eight and nine, God is self-described as giving birth to and swaddling the sea, clouds, and darkness. Again, God is described in feminine and motherhood images.

Later in the same chapter, God uses both male and female images in adjacent verses. “Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew?”²⁹ From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?” While father and begotten are masculine, womb and giving birth are absolutely feminine.

The first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs talks a lot about Wisdom. Wisdom is a feminine word. Especially in the eighth chapter, we find the thought that Wisdom was with or was part of God from the very beginning of the process of creation. In some ways the passage reads a bit like the first chapter of John’s Gospel, where we are told that, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And so in Proverbs we read of feminine imagery in reference to God.

The prophet Isaiah also tells us that God uses feminine images to describe himself - or if you will permit me, herself. In chapter 42 God says, “I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.” Later on in Isaiah, in chapter 66 we run into more feminine and motherhood images of God. Verse 9 reads, “Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God.” A few verses later, the text reads, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

Across the breadth of the Old Testament, in Genesis, in Deuteronomy, Job, Proverbs, and Isaiah, we find God described, sometimes in self-description, as having feminine characteristics and actions. Interestingly enough, Jesus does the same sort of thing in the gospel of Matthew, where he says, “If only you had been willing, I would have gathered you under my wings like a momma hen gathers her chicks.” That’s a pretty maternal image!

And while we’re in the New Testament, I’d like to take a small side trip to redeem a bit of the Apostle Paul’s reputation. At the end of the book of Romans, Paul sends his greetings to a lot of people. In that list of folks are several women including a deacon and an Apostle. The greeting in verse thirteen is a bit unusual. He sends his greeting to Rufus and to Rufus’ mother and says that she is his mother, too. Some translations say that she is like a mother to him, others imply that she is his mother. I think the Greek says that she is Paul’s mother as well as Rufus’ mother. The point here is this. Either way, Paul is the only writer in the New Testament who pauses to say, “Hi, Mom. Love ya!”

So, where does all of this motherhood of God exploration take us? First of all, we men shouldn’t get too hung up on gender roles and what’s appropriate for women but not for men. If Jesus was willing and eager to fuss over folks like an old mother hen, then we shouldn’t feel like nurturing and protecting are somehow outside our masculine role in life.

Now, the gender thing can be awkward. From the scriptures we’ve looked at, it is just as appropriate to refer to God as “she” as it is to say “he.” If God keeps talking about God’s womb, then “she” has got to be appropriate. We usually say “he” out of tradition and habit. Using “she” for God can be so distracting for some of us that are set in our ways, that we may not hear anything else that’s being said. I wish I had a good grammatical answer to all of this. It certainly points to how human language - and English in particular - is too limited to speak clearly about the divine.

Some years ago, I was reading the introduction to an important Christian book. The author explained that he understood the issues regarding using gender pronouns in reference to God. He announced

that he had decided to continue using male terms with reference to God because it was traditional and because he felt like men were still in great need of a good fatherhood example to look up to and emulate. I'm sure we men do have a great need for that. But it would be shortchanging women to fail to point out that God offers a similar opportunity to them.

In all of the passages that point to motherhood being an aspect of God just like fatherhood, there are some common themes. God is always creating and/or protecting and/or comforting. These are not traits that are the exclusive dominion of women and motherhood, but every time God is seen in feminine terms, one or more of these actions are present. We know that motherhood means bringing new life into this world. But it goes far beyond that. Life is to be supported. It's to be appreciated. It's to be nurtured and watered and fed and tended, and admired and rejoiced in. Motherhood involves protecting life. It includes protecting your children from sickness, from the heat and cold, from poor nutrition, from physical harm and emotional abuse. It means protecting your children from weakness that would leave them unequipped educationally, emotionally, and spiritually to face the trials and troubles of the world when they become adults. Motherhood also involves comforting. It means listening to hurts and worries and pain. It means being present and offering steadfast love even when you can't or won't fix it. It means always loving and being ready to hug.

One of my favorite Baptist ministers is Tony Campolo. His wife's name is Peggy. She said to him one time years ago that she was sometimes a little overwhelmed by some of the people that she met when traveling with him. Tony suggested that she should give some thought to what she was doing in her life that she thought was important and to think of some way to be able to express it. Later on, on another trip, someone asked Peggy, "And what do you do, Mrs. Campolo?" Peggy replied, "I am nurturing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time." To which the other person said, "O, my, I'm just a lawyer."

I'd like for all mothers here this morning to please stand. Please repeat after me:
I am a woman. As a woman, I am created in God's image. I am a mother. Like my Rock, my Redeemer, my God, motherhood is part of who I am. Motherhood is about love and life, about creating and sustaining, about comforting and protecting, even when unasked or ignored. God is perfect at this. I am not. Nonetheless, I am proud and honored for this to be part of my call in God's service. Amen.

^{NRS} **John 4:24** God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

^{NRS} **Genesis 3:8** They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

^{NRS} **Deuteronomy 32:17** They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared. ¹⁸ You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.

^{NRS} **Job 38:28** "Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? ²⁹ From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?"

^{NRS} **Isaiah 42:14** For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.

^{NRS} **Isaiah 44:24** Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth;

^{NRS} **Isaiah 66:9** Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God.

^{NRS} **Isaiah 66:13** As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.