

## **“Seeing God Through Mothers”**

[Isaiah 49:14-16a](#)

As Christians, we are quite familiar with referring to God as Father. Though God is neither male nor female, most of our descriptions of God are masculine images, like God as king, or as warrior, fighting our battles. We call God “Our Father,” as we recite the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday. And a traditional Doxology we often sing together in worship ends with the phrase, “Praise *Father*, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

However, although the Bible was developed and written in patriarchal contexts, God is not only portrayed in masculine metaphors. We find many images of God as Mother, who gives birth to God’s children, preserving and nurturing them. And seeing as it is Mother’s Day, it’s worth highlighting the feminine metaphors used to describe God. In doing so, perhaps we will discover deeper truths about the nature of God.

The most common feminine image of God we find in the Bible is God as a mother bird, who protects her children. Here are some Old Testament scriptures which capture that image:

- In Exodus, God asks Moses to tell the Israelites these words, “You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to me” (Exodus 19:4, CEB)
- In Deuteronomy, Moses says to the Israelites, “Like an eagle protecting its nest, hovering over its young, God spread out his wings, took hold of Israel, carried him on his back.” (Deuteronomy 32:11, CEB)
- In Ruth, Boaz says to Ruth, “May you receive a rich reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you’ve come to seek refuge.” (Ruth 2:12, CEB)

This image of God as a sheltering mother bird is found in the book of Psalms, too.

“Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 17:8, NIV);

“... I take refuge in the shadow of your wings until destruction passes by” (Psalm 57:1, CEB);

“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge” (Psalm 91:4, NIV).

Then, in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we find Jesus using the mother bird image for himself as he laments over Jerusalem:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gather her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34, NIV)

Here is something worth noting in the choice of the type of bird Jesus compares himself to as he made his statement. In the ancient Middle East, female gods were often depicted as birds; it is highly likely that the

imagery of God as a mother bird in the Old Testament was a reflection of this cultural feature. And, among all the birds, the eagle, as the most magnificent and mighty predatory bird, was chosen to portray God.

So, it is striking that here Jesus compared himself not to a powerful, mighty eagle but to a vulnerable, lowly hen. Just as he rode a donkey instead of a horse as he entered Jerusalem one last time, Jesus seems to be making a statement as to the nature of God.

Going back to the feminine images of God, the Bible also offers images of God as an actual human mother. These images are found mostly in the book of Isaiah. Through the prophet Isaiah, God said to the Israelites:

“For a long time, I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But, now, like a *woman* in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.” (Isaiah 42:14, NIV)

“As a *mother* comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 66:13, NIV)

These words of God as a mother who delivers and comforts her child were given to the people of Israel while they were experiencing the Babylonian exile. This was a time when the Israelites had been defeated by a foreign empire. The city of Jerusalem was seized, the Jewish Temple was destroyed, and the ruling political class was taken into captivity to Babylon. The Babylonian exile was a national crisis that had huge spiritual significance. Living in a foreign land, God’s people felt lost. Feeling forsaken and forgotten by their God, they cried out into the seeming silence, into the empty and dark void in their lives. It was during this moment of terrible crisis that the prophet Isaiah delivered the words of God. In today’s scripture, we heard God saying to them:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” (Isaiah 49:15, NRSV)

About 9 months ago, a mother was reunited with her 48 year-old son, who had been separated from her at birth during the Vietnam War. She said, though she did not have a chance even to see the face of her baby, she knew her baby was a boy.

Having become pregnant after a relationship with an American soldier who did not know about her pregnancy and was transferred to another military base, she was forced by her parents to give up her baby for adoption. But, for almost half a century, this mother never forgot about her baby and believed that, with God’s help, she would someday be reunited with her son.

Now living in America, her prayers were finally answered when her son, who had been adopted by an American family, submitted his information into an online DNA database, curious about who his biological parents were. At their emotional reunion, she said, “I remember in the Bible it said knock and it shall be opened, ask and you shall receive. I wouldn’t let go.”

This is the everlasting, enduring love we celebrate today on Mother’s Day. We honor those women in our lives, on earth and in heaven, who have served as our mothers, remembering their unconditional and sacri-

ficial love for us. On this day, we also know that there are those in our midst for whom today is not a wonderful day of celebration. Sadly, in our broken world, which is a reflection of the individual brokenness that we all bear, we know that there are mothers who abandon their babies at birth, mothers who neglect, abuse, or even kill their children. We know mothers who disown their adult children because they cannot approve of who their children turned out to be or what their children have done.

We know that even good mothers, who love their children dearly, are not always perfect. We can be moody and cranky; we can be selfish and stubborn; we can be mean and harsh; we can be unreasonable and unforgiving. And, yes, even the best of mothers can forget about us!

But, here is God's promise for us, God who is our eternal Parent, both our Father *and* Mother:

**“I will not forget you. See I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.”**

Last year as a Christmas gift, my daughter gave me a heart-shaped object that has the engraved names of my children, their spouses, and grandson. Whenever I look at it, I always think about them. As I was reflecting on the scripture passage for today, I couldn't help but think, what if their names were engraved not on this object, but on my palms? Surely, I would think about them anytime I did something with my hands. I would be reminded of them all the time. I would remember them forever.

My friends, that's exactly what God has done for you and me in today's scripture, which is one of the most beautiful expressions of God's everlasting love for us. God has you engraved on the palms of God's hands. God remembers you forever! The scripture tells us that it is not just your name that God has engraved, but “you.” God did not simply engrave your name, but you as a whole person. This means that the fullness of you, with all your strengths and weaknesses, with all your joys and sorrows, with all your hopes and disappointments, that they are all written into the palms of God's hands. You, just as who you were, just as who you are, and just as who you will be, are fully and completely in God's hands.

This the love of God we are given a glimpse of through the love of our mothers as we celebrate Mother's Day today. So, praises and thanks be to God who gave us the mothers who care for us and take us under their protective wing! And thanks be to God, our eternal Mother, who will never forget us, who will forever seek a reunion with us!