

Reflections for Mother's Day, May 14, 2017

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Mothering God

The Bible was written a very long time ago. Things were different then. That's no surprise. But it's something that we need to take into account as we continue to read and study the Bible and listen for the Spirit's leading.

The Bible was written in a time when women didn't count for much. The general assumption was that women were subservient to men. In fact, women were the property of men. And the functions that women served were secondary, always, to the functions that men served in society. For example, while child bearing was extremely important, it was assumed that the woman contributed nothing more than a container, a place for the fetus to grow. The seed, the being and character of the new life, came from the man.

Mothers were necessary, of course, but fathers were the ones who were really important. From the father came your being, your identity, your name, your belonging, your place in society. Identification with one's father meant protection and security and a future. Fathers had the right and the ability to claim or to reject any baby born into the family. Survival was a father's prerogative. Taking this into consideration, it is no wonder that God, the Almighty, the creator of earth and sky, the ruler of the universe is seen as a father. God the father sets the standard. He claims us as his own. He provides a place for us in his house and his family. He keeps us safe.

These were the assumptions of the time and the culture in which the Bible was written. And they are not unfamiliar assumptions in our culture today. God is our Father because God is powerful and doing important stuff and that's the way the world works.

But God is more than that. God is more nuanced than that. God is more complete than that. We see this, too, revealed in the Bible, and considering the culture out of which it came, this is an amazing thing. In the Bible, along with all the references to God as father, we find references to God as mother, a mothering God, a God who encompasses and includes things that are traditionally female. You have to dig to find these references. You have to keep your eyes open. But they are there. And the fact that they are there, allows us to see a fuller, more nuanced picture of who God is and who God means for us to be. In this larger more complete picture of God we see what it means for us, men and women who are made in God's image, to be whole and compassionate as human beings, as human parents and as caregivers.

And so, on this Mother's Day, in honor of those women who carried us in their bodies and gave us birth, and in honor of the women and men who have cared for, nurtured and protected us, we're going to explore some of these scripture passages that speak to us about our mothering God.

[Hand out scripture passges]

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

What does this tell us about God and about us? We are, as women and as men, reflective of God, who contains us – male and female – within Godself. We are made in God's image.

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

Here we have the image of God – a Rock, rather a mixed metaphor – being pregnant, carrying a fetus and giving birth.

*#3. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
"Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver-- let him rescue the one in whom he*

delights!" Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. Psalm 22:7-9

#4. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you. Psalm 71:5-6

These are images of birth but from a different perspective, the perspective of a midwife, a woman who is present at birth and who helps new life come forth. God is this midwife.

#5. 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 66:9-13

This passage is full of birthing, mothering images: The midwife, helping deliver. The mother who carries and delivers. The source of food – a nursing mother. Carrying, caring for and playing with a child. Comforting a child. Allowing a child to flourish and grow.

#6. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." 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. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. Isaiah 49:14-16

#7. O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. Psalm 131:1-2

More images of comfort and care, of safety, of being known deeply as a mother knows her child.

#8. [Jesus is speaking] "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!" Matthew 23:37

Jesus expresses this kind of motherly longing to comfort.

But it's not all sweetness and light being a mother...

#9. *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. Isaiah 42:14*

#10. *I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them. Hosea 13:8*

In these passages we see the length to which a woman, a mother, a female will go. It's not always nice and sweet. Sometimes a mother's love, a woman's ability to persist and deliver, are fierce and angry on behalf of the life within her or which she has born.

#11. *Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." Luke 13:20-21*

#12. *"Or suppose a woman has ten valuable silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and look in every corner of the house and sweep every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her because she has found her lost coin. In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." Luke 15:8-10*

Here we see God explained in what is stereotypical women's work, a mother's work, a housekeeper's work. Cooking, cleaning. Very caring, nurturing, home-making things to do. And God identifies and claims these things.

And we can't overlook the New Testament image of being born again, being born of God.

#13. *Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." John 3:3-8*

#14. *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:7*

#15. *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of*

God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. 1 John 5:1-4

*#16. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were **born**, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. John 1:12-13*

This is not the image of begetting, of God just planting the seed of new life. No, it is the image of God giving birth, new birth, to us. We are born of God, born of the Spirit. God is our father *and* our mother.

Julian of Norwich, an English mystic or hermit who lived from 1346 to 1416, was one of the first persons in the Christian tradition to speak of the love of God as mothering love. When she was 30 years old Julian fell ill and while she was ill she had a series of intense visions of Jesus Christ. She wrote a book about these visions entitled Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love. This is believed to be the first book written by a woman in the English language.

Julian's visions of Jesus were full of joy and compassion and parental love. She saw God as both our father and our mother. She wrote, "In our creation God Almighty is our natural father and God all-wisdom is our natural mother with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit. These are all one God, one Lord."

There is a song in our hymnal that is based on the writings of Julian of Norwich. Mennonite poet Jean Janzen put her words into poetry and Janet Peachey added the music. The title of this hymn is "Mothering God, you gave us birth." It's #482 in the blue hymnal. I've asked Barry, Brenda and Bruce to help me sing this for you. As we sing, let these images of a mothering, nurturing, life-giving, foundational God comfort, strengthen and encourage your soul.

*Mothering God, you gave me birth in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, Source of every breath, you are my rain, my wind, my sun.*

*Mothering Christ, you took my form, offering me your food of light,
grain of life, and grape of love, your very body for my peace.*

*Mothering Spirit, nurturing one, in arms of patience hold me close,
so that in faith I root and grow until I flower, until I know.*

On this Mother's Day we are grateful for the life we have been given. We are grateful for loving care and for fierce protection and for comfort in times of trouble. We are grateful for those who have fed us and clothed us and made a home for us. We are grateful, too, for new ideas and understanding. We are grateful for new birth. In all this we see God's mothering care for us and we are at peace. With the psalmist we say, "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother." Thanks be to our mothering God. Amen.