

Message for May 1, 2022

Exodus 3:7-14

Luke 13:31-35

I was at a June presbytery meeting years ago and those who had attended that year's General Assembly were giving their reports. These reports are usually rather boring and these were no exception, until one of the elders gave his. To say that he was upset would be an understatement.

Every morning at Assembly begins with a worship service and during one of the services a minister had addressed God in prayer as "our loving mother". The elder in question was almost beside himself with rage. How dare that minister address God in such a way! God is our father, not our mother! It all made for an interesting debate but moving beyond that elder's anger, it did raise a fundamental issue; just what is God like?

Jesus' fame had spread far and wide, and while some people loved him others hated him with a passion viewing him as a threat to their power and prestige. One of these people was King Herod. One day a group of Pharisees, who are of course usually portrayed as Jesus' enemies, warned him to run away because Herod wanted to kill him. This warning though didn't seem to bother Jesus at all, and his response was to say that nothing could happen to him until he went to Jerusalem. After all Jerusalem was the place where all of the great prophets had been killed. Jesus said that he was safe until he went to the city but, he added, the day was coming when he would go there. Despite the danger he would go because he loved the city and its people. Why he even wanted to protect them just as a mother hen protects her chicks under the shelter of her wings.

So goes today's second scripture passage and as a part of preparing a sermon, I usually look at various books and authors to see what they have to say about the passage in question. When it came to today's text though, I discovered something rather interesting. Without exception, the older books focused on the necessity of Jesus' dying in Jerusalem. The newer books however focus on something entirely different and that is one line in particular: "I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings". Many modern scholars find this line very significant because

when describing himself and his work, Jesus described himself not as a father figure but rather as a mother figure. This scripture passage in fact is one of the few times where Jesus, and indeed the very Bible itself, uses feminine imagery to describe the nature of God. To put it another way, this passage in a low-key way challenges us to think about what God is like.

In recent years there has been a great deal of debate about the nature of God and to a point this is a reflection of what has happened in the world around us; indeed while we may not realize it, many of us have lived through a social revolution. Not all that many years ago, the ideal if not the reality, was that men went off to work while women stayed home and looked after the home and family. Now, whether it be through choice or necessity, most women work outside of the home. Indeed whether it be in such as the church, business or the military for example, women today are doing jobs and fulfilling roles that were unthinkable not that many years ago. While equality of the sexes is far from being a reality, there can be no doubt that by and large women in our society today have a freedom of choice and opportunities that were unimaginable a couple of generations ago. Inevitably this has had an impact on the world of religion and how we think about God.

We normally think of God and refer to God as being a male and this is perfectly natural because we are simply following the Bible's lead. The Bible generally uses masculine terms like king, lord and of course father when it refers to God. The Bible however, besides being God's word, also reflects the society and world in which it was written. That world and society was incredibly male dominated. In Jesus' day for example, Jewish men recited a prayer every morning in which they thanked God for not creating them as women. Women at that time had virtually no legal rights and were discouraged from leaving the house unless it was to get water, buy food, or to worship. No matter how unhappy a marriage may have been a woman could not initiate a divorce, while a man could for any reason at all. There is in fact a case where a man divorced his wife simply because she burnt his dinner. And if a man did divorce his wife then she could be out on the street without a penny to her name. The best parallel as to how women were treated in Jesus' day is how women are treated today in certain fundamentalist Islamic countries. Given this environment then, it is only natural that the prophets and other Biblical writers thought of God as being like a man. And yet even while the Bible usually thinks of and describes

God in masculine terms, there is some feminine imagery to be found such as today's passage with its mother hen imagery.

I have to admit that, probably reflecting my age, I feel most comfortable using masculine language when thinking and talking about God. If a person refers to God as "our Father" I don't give it a passing thought, but if a person refers to God as "our Mother" then I immediately sit up and take notice. The truth however is that God is far beyond all of our efforts to describe him. As I have already said we traditionally describe God as if he is a male, but God is not a male. Neither is God a female either. And we can't say that God is a force or a power because God is a being. The truth is that none of our terms or names for God really do God justice; all they do at best is offer us a small glimpse of what God is like. We can use terms like father, lord, and even mother hen to describe God, but the truth is that when we talk about God we are trying to describe the indescribable. This in fact is the message of today's first scripture passage.

Moses had just been told by God that he was to lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and he felt totally overwhelmed by this task. Who was he to do this? Why would anyone ever listen to him? Moses said that if he were to lead the Hebrews then he needed a sign or token that God had really sent him. What Moses did then was ask God to tell him his name.

Now what we have to realize is that when Moses asked God to tell him his name, he really wanted to know a lot more than just what to call God. In those days it was believed that a person's name described their character; to know a person's name was to know what they were really like deep down. For this reason people often had two names, a 'public' one that everyone knew and a 'private' or 'real' name that was only known by the person's family and closest friends. And with this in mind, what was God's name? What is God's reality? "I am who I am". When asked point blank to describe himself, God didn't reply with either masculine or feminine imagery. Rather he simply said: "I am who I am". God is what God is. God is, as the theologians like to say, "totally other", so different, so holy, so righteous, so creative, so powerful, and so far removed from us. This leads us to the great paradox of God.

I am who I am. God is what God is and he is beyond all of our attempts to describe him. This is one reality and yet, the other reality is that God is so close, so loving, and just like a mother hen. That God is so close and yet so

beyond us is a mystery. How can God be so close yet so far, so righteous yet so forgiving, so similar yet so different? It is only our human pride and arrogance that lets us think that we can and should be able to explain and understand everything, including God himself.

While not a Christian book as such, I think that the British writer Kenneth Grahame captured the paradox of God very well in his classic, "The Wind in the Willows". The scene opens with Mole and Rat searching for a little lost otter child. After looking and looking they eventually found him, safely guarded by the half animal, half man, god Pan. Then, to quote the story itself:

"Rat!" he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?' 'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid! Of HIM? O, never, never! And yet – and yet – O, Mole, I am afraid!' Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship."

Afraid of God ... never! And yet in the face of the paradox that is the nature of God, the least we can do is bow our heads and worship.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, you truly are in the words of a hymn, "Immortal, invisible, God only wise. You are in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes. You are the most glorious, the Ancient of Days". We have so many images and metaphors that try and describe you and yet, at best, all they do is give us a glimpse of the wonder that is you. We praise you and thank you for your very being, and we also praise you and thank you for your greatest self-revelation of all, your one and only Son. We thank you for your Son's life, teaching, death and resurrection and all that they mean.

We thank you for this day, the first of yet another month in the life of your creation. We thank you for the life that surrounds us with its beauty and goodness. Truly we are blessed with so much, more than what we really need. In a world where so many go hungry, we dare ask ourselves what to eat and sometimes even say that there is nothing to eat, even as our cupboards, fridges

and freezers are overbrimming with food. May we always be grateful for what we have.

We pray this day for your blessing on all who are ill and on all who grieve. We thank you for all the special people that mean so much to us, praying for their well-being and your blessing upon them.

Looking ahead to the provincial election next month, we give you thanks that we live in a nation where we are free to choose those who govern and make the laws. We thank you for the candidates who are willing to stand for office, and for all of the officials and volunteers who make the election process work. We pray for all the lands where the very idea and prospect of choosing those who govern is a distant dream at best.

As the war in Ukraine continues and even threatens to escalate, we pray for the safety and well-being of all in that suffering land. We pray for wisdom for all in positions of authority as to how to respond to the violence and suffering. We pray for the restoration of peace and security, and that there may be justice as well. We give you thanks and pray too for all the people in Ukraine and elsewhere, including those in our own land, who are trying to alleviate the suffering.

May your blessing be over all that you have made. We ask these blessings in your Son's name. Amen