

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush **

July 10, 2022

Hosea 11:1–4, Isaiah 46:3–4, 66:10–13, Luke 13:34

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God, source of all light, by your Word and Spirit you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. That in understanding and wisdom we can then follow and serve. Amen

For the past several weeks we have been exploring the various images, names, and metaphors in scripture for God. No one image is enough. One image just isn’t rich enough to capture the complexity that is God. Our language is limited, and so we seek to find ways to describe the indescribable. In the previous weeks we have looked at images of potter, shield, fortress, and rock, and king or sovereign. This week is another image – but like a couple of weeks ago, it is an image that is rich and complex in its own right – that of parent or God in feminine imagery.

It was difficult to pick just one, or even two sections of scripture for this Sunday. There are many images of God in scripture that celebrate or lift up feminine imagery. Wisdom, which is feminine in Hebrew, is throughout the book of Proverbs. Likewise, the Hebrew word for breath or Spirit is feminine. There are several passages in both the Older and Newer Testaments that reference God’s womb. Several passages liken God to a nursing mother. An image of a nurturing mother is also used in both the Older and Newer Testaments.¹

For today’s readings, we hear from some of the prophets and a single verse from the Gospel of Luke. Listen for a word from God.

Hosea 11:1-4

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

² The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and offering incense to idols.

³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up in my arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.

⁴ 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.

Isaiah 46:3-4

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am he;
even when you turn gray I will carry you.

I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save.

Isaiah 66:10-13

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 bounced on her knees.

As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

Luke 13:34

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!

This spring a robin kept trying to build a nest on a part of our garage. We have a light just next to the side door from the garage that goes directly into our backyard. The light fixture is tucked under the eaves of the garage roof. So, I understand why the mother bird would want to build a nest there. It was off the ground, tucked under the shelter of the roof, and the light fixture made a pretty good base for a nest.

For days, the mother bird kept bringing pieces of grass or hay and tiny twigs trying to build a nest. And every day for several days, I would remove whatever she brought to discourage her from building the nest

there. This door and light fixture are directly next to our patio area, and I was afraid if she was successful at building her nest there, that our coming and going from the patio would disturb her, or worse yet, that she would abandon the eggs and they wouldn't be hatched. This mother bird was tenacious, and quick. I had forgotten about the nest under construction for a few days, and the next thing I knew, there was a nest sitting on top of the light fixture, tucked under the eaves, and there was momma bird sitting on the nest. We decided that we wouldn't move the nest, and that my family and her family would have to figure out how to live together.

We curtailed some of our activity on the patio, but we did continue to use it. The first few days, whenever we would come outside, the momma bird would fly out of the nest to the nearest power line or branch and watch before she would decide shortly thereafter to fly back to the nest and resume her perch. After a couple of weeks, the eggs hatched, and we had 3 or 4 baby robins in the nest. We then saw two robins frequently making trips back and forth to the nest to feed the babies. A couple of weeks after that, it seemed that the babies had flown the nest – or so I thought.

One afternoon I heard quite a ruckus. There were several robins flying around my backyard. When I looked out the patio door, I discovered that a crow was trying to get at one of the babies and about half a dozen robins were making noise and flying at the crow to get the crow to leave the baby alone. They were successful and the crow left. Later that afternoon I was in our basement, and I heard a weird sound. I discovered that one of the baby birds had fallen into one of our window wells. Somehow it had gotten under the window well covering but couldn't get back out. Without thinking about it, I rushed outside to move the window well covering so the baby bird could escape. I got about a foot away from the window well covering and then I heard squawking like

you wouldn't believe and could have sworn out of the corner of my eye I saw the beating of wings. I moved away as fast as I could and went back into the house. I wasn't successful in moving the covering because I discovered it was screwed into the house. I was going to need a drill or a screwdriver.

I grabbed a drill *and* a blanket. I threw the blanket over my head for protection, and I went back out to the window well. Again, there was a lot of squawking. I was able to free the covering from the well and I moved away as fast as I could. The baby bird was free, and I had not been pecked. But that mama bird was fierce – she was going to protect that baby at all costs. And she had friends to help her!

Previous to this event, whenever I have thought of the image of a mother bird, it's like the image on the front of the bulletin – a plump bird, hiding her little chicks under her wings. A comforting, soft image. A gentle image. But my experience of the mother bird protecting her baby was not gentle. It was anything but! Certainly, there is room for a comforting image – and perhaps many of us think of gentle, nurturing, and comforting images as more feminine – but we also have the idea of mama bear or mama lion. These images are also of fierce protectors willing to risk life and limb to protect their children. Being a parent myself, I understand this impulse. And the same is true for my wife – don't mess with the kids! Nurturing impulses and fierce protective impulses are not consigned to just one gender.

And, as we learn more, we also know better. Gender norms are constructs – our understanding of gender is a construct. Our understandings of what it means to be masculine and feminine can change. All of our images and metaphors for God are constructed. None of them are fully adequate – which is why we need so many. God is neither male nor female. God cannot be contained in a binary idea of

gender. In scripture we see that God is represented as both male and female, and as wind, spirit, fortress, rock, sovereign, and so many other images. What all of these images are doing is trying to describe different attributes of God, different ways of seeing God, and different ways of understanding God.

Unfortunately, for many years, it became the norm to limit our images for God in the language we used. And often, we still fall into that trap. Some argued it was because Jesus called God, Father. And so, almost exclusively, many churches used male imagery for God. We saw last week that God is often depicted as sovereign or king, which reinforces the masculine imagery. But when Jesus comes along, he addresses God in a more personal way. And this was pretty radical for the time. Faithful Jews are very careful about the name of God and how they address God – for fear that they break the commandment of keeping God’s name holy. As one writer says, “pious Jews, aware of the gap between a holy God and sinful human beings, would never have dared address God as *Ab* (Hebrew) or *Abba*, the Aramaic word for ‘Daddy,’ which gradually came to mean ‘dear father.’ Jesus shocked many of his contemporaries by referring to God as his Father and by inviting his followers to call God ‘Father.’”ⁱⁱ

Jesus turned heads even more when he went on to tell one of his most famous stories – the “Father with Two Sons,” also known as the “Prodigal Son.” The Father in the story doesn’t act at all the way he is supposed to act. In Jesus’ time, if a son squandered his inheritance, the expectation would be that the father would cut the child off and send him away. But the father in Jesus’ story doesn’t act this way. Instead of dismissing and banishing the son, the father, filled with compassion, runs to greet his child and throws his arms around him and rejoices that the son has returned.

One theologian notes, “Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public. They never have. To do so would be deeply humiliating. The father runs knowing that in so doing he will deflect the attention of the community away from his ragged son to himself. People will focus on the extraordinary sight of a distinguished, self-respecting landowner humiliating himself in public by running down the road revealing his legs.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And this, I believe is why I find the image of parent so profound – whether it is a mama hen, a pregnancy full of possibility, a nursing mother, or a compassionate father running with arms wide open – because all of it is so vulnerable, and fierce, and humbling, and extraordinary. And, like any metaphor or image, it is not perfect. There are plenty of parental relationships that are not good, or are problematic, or abusive. I don’t disregard that. We know loving families take many forms. And that is yet another reason why it is so important that we have expansive images for God.

The relationship of parent and child is one of vulnerability and risk. Author Elizabeth Stone is quoted as saying, “making the decision to have a child-it’s momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.” And this is what God does, and what Jesus demonstrates. For God so loved the world, that Jesus shows up in the world. God – the one who created the whole world just by uttering a word – the one who brought forth day and night and dusk and dawn, stars and planets, blackholes and quarks, the one who made mountains, hills, and plains, the one who made oceans and rivers and estuaries and lakes and ponds, the one who created it all and everything in between – shows up in the world in the form of a humble, fragile baby.

A small child who would grow to show us yet one more image of God. Of loving parent, who is willing to do whatever it takes to show that love to us. Who wants a deep relationship with us. Who is our fierce advocate and compassionate comforter. Who calls us beloved children. Thanks be to God!

ⁱ For more detailed imagery, and some book recommendations, see <https://mikemorrell.org/2012/05/biblical-proofs-for-the-feminine-face-of-god-in-scripture/>

ⁱⁱ Ann Spangler, <https://faithgateway.com/blogs/christian-books/god-abba-father/> and in “The Names of God: 52 Bible Studies for Individuals and Groups”

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenneth E. Bailey, “Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel’s Story” p. 109