

“Our Mother, Who Art in Heaven”

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Overbrook Presbyterian Church

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First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 49:13-17

¹³Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted His people, and will have compassion on His suffering ones. ¹⁴But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.” ¹⁵Can 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. ¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me. ¹⁷Your builders outdo your destroyers, and those who laid you waste go away from you.

Second Scripture Lesson: Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; He will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to Your word.” Then the angel departed from her.



Sermon: “Our Mother, Who Art in Heaven”

Happy Mother’s Day! To moms and the people who have been moms to us by circumstance if not biology. To those who bore us, raised us, nurtured us, and protected us; who woke us up when the alarm didn’t, forced us to eat veggies when we wouldn’t, helped us do homework when we thought we couldn’t, and taught us the right things to do and the things that we shouldn’t. From me and on behalf of all the children you helped form and shape into the people they are today, thank you.

Mothers have been an important part of our story since the beginning. Not just for their biological role; everybody that is, or ever has been, had a mother. But for their role in helping us to become the people God intends for us to be.

You see, we are all formed and shaped by the people in our lives. The “self-made man/woman” is a myth. Each of us is the product of the people who nurtured us and raised us. And who you are has definitely been shaped and influenced by the people with whom you’ve crossed paths in your life. For most of us, those influences include our mothers.

Mine taught me to cook and to do my own laundry and she instilled in me a love of reading. Back when the internet was called “books,” my parents bought us a set of encyclopedias. A genuine leather-bound, 22-volume set of books encompassing the totality of the worlds knowledge. Or at least it seemed that way.

My mother would sit down with me and we’d pick a volume and pour through it for hours. My favorite was volume 18: “So-Sz”... because that was where the article on “Space Exploration” was located, and my childhood dream was to become an astronaut.

My mother taught me to be kind and to be nice to people, especially the ones other people picked on. She taught me to see the blessings in my life; to recognize that the good things and the loving people in my life were gifts from God. And she taught me to get myself to church; that God’s love for me is so great and that God had done so much for me, that the least I can do is show up in church every week to say thank you. And for the most part, those lessons stuck. I likely wouldn’t be standing here before you had they not.

And I watch Mary every day, being an advocate for our boys, filling-out paperwork, spending hours on the phone with providers and insurance companies. And I see her loving our children, being patient with them, making them a priority, listening to their stories, encouraging their creativity, helping with homework, and always being a loving presence in their lives. And I remember that so many of God’s blessings are experienced in and through the people God puts in our lives.

As a matter of fact, Mary is not here today because she is spending Mother’s Day mothering our sick ten-year-old who woke-up in the middle of the night and ran to the bathroom to be sick. I tried get up and help him, but I slipped and fell on the way and quite possibly, broke my toe. Mary cleaned him up, put him back to bed, and sat with him all night. She’s still there now. She is spending her day with a sick ten-year-old. I may have a broken toe. I think I came out ahead.

On this Mother’s Day, it is appropriate to consider not only the ways in which God has blessed us through our mothers and the people who have been mothers to us, but also the way in which God embodies motherhood to us. You see, the church has long used male and masculine imagery to describe God, almost exclusively. We pray to “Our Father,” we envision the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and we tend to ascribe to God masculine ideals like strength and power, choosing to describe God with terms like “Lord” and “King.” When we use pronouns, because saying “God” over and over can grow tiresome, we almost always default to “He” and “Him.” Try slipping in the occasional “She” or “Her” and just watch the reactions you get.

And there are reasons we tend to default to masculine language and imagery for God. The biggest reason is that the Bible itself does so. And that is also the legacy we were handed from the generations of Jews and Christians that came before us. We tend to see God as masculine because that’s what we’ve always been taught. In fact, most people probably think of God as an old man with a long white beard who gives us the things we ask for. But that’s not God, that’s Santa Claus.

Reverend Shiao Chong has studied this subject and points out that mother goddess cults used to be pretty common in the Old Testament period. These cults worshipped nature...

Thus, all that are primary issues with nature, [such as] fertility, sexuality, life, health and death, were associated with the ancient Mother Goddess cults. These religions [tended]

to merge sex with religious ecstasy and economic security (agriculture and husbandry). It is not surprising, then, that many of their religious rituals involved sexuality, even temple prostitutes.

“Hence, the Old Testament’s refusal to call God “mother” was not a misogynist act. It was an attempt to emphasize God’s transcendence over nature and to steer away from the ancient goddess religions that over-emphasized divine immanence in nature.”¹

So basically, masculine images of God were always preferred. But female images reminded people of nature cults. So masculine language and images were chosen almost exclusively as a way to avoid blurring the line between the God-worship of Israel, and the pagan cults of the surrounding nations.

Factually, God is not male or female. God is divine and transcends our human gender identity of male and female.

The Bible actually uses several female images to describe God. God is at different points described like a mother hen who gathers her brood under her wings,² a mother Eagle providing for her chicks,³ and a mother bear defending her cubs.⁴ The prophet Isaiah describes God as being like a mother who comforts her children,⁵ and like a nursing mother,⁶ and also as a mother giving birth.⁷

But the place where we see God most fully embrace femininity and motherhood is when God chooses to break into the world, not as a powerful male figure, the son of a King or Head of State, but as a small, vulnerable child born to an inconsequential woman, from a forgotten backwater town on the margins of the Roman Empire.

In our second scripture reading we heard the familiar story of Mary being visited by the angel Gabriel who gives her the news that she has been chosen. In her will be life and that life will bear the presence of God into the world. Which is interesting, not just because she will be a vessel for divinity, but also because she is valued so greatly that she receives the message directly.

Back in Genesis, when God breaks the news that God will form a family into a nation that will be a blessing to all people, that news comes to the man of the family, Abraham.⁸ When God announces that Abraham’s wife Sarah will have a child in her old age, that news is brought to Abraham.⁹ When God appears to announce that God will save that family from slavery in Egypt, it is to a man, Moses, that God appears.¹⁰ When God announces a new King in Israel, that news is brought to a man, the Prophet Samuel.¹¹

But here, God does not send a messenger to Joseph. God does not declare to Joseph that he will be the father of a child who will be the Son of God. That news is given directly to Mary. God’s blessing to the world flows directly through her.

And remember, at this time women had few rights. They are essentially the property of their fathers and husbands. Sexual assault was only seen as a crime when the woman was married or betrothed to be married. It wasn’t a *violent* crime against her, it was a *property* crime against him. And many women in the bible are considered so inconsequential that we are never even told their names. Yet it is through a woman and more importantly through the process of motherhood, that God acts to redeem the world.

But that is not the only place where God works through mothers to advance the story of redemption. Mothers feature prominently throughout scripture. And it is through the mothers of the Bible that we see not only what God's love for us is like, but how we should love and care for one another.

There is Eve, the first human mother in history.¹² Consider the courage it took for her to embrace the role of mother. She had no mother of her own to ask advice. She had no baby books to consult or groups of other mothers to chat with at the playground while their children played in the sandbox. She had no experience from which to draw save perhaps watching the animals around her care for their young ones. She was literally making it up as she went along.

Consider Jochebed and the unnamed daughter of Pharaoh, the two mothers of Moses.¹³ When Pharaoh issued an order that all Hebrew boy babies should be killed, Jochebed refused to give in to the absolute power of an authoritarian ruler. Instead, she slipped down to the river and placed her infant in a basket covered with pitch and left him there to float secretly among the reeds. Likely she knew that Pharaoh's daughter bathed near there and might have hoped that she would look kindly upon her child. And Pharaoh's daughter, should very well have known about her father's edict. When she found a baby floating in the reeds, she should have suspected where it came from. Yet she took it in and raised it as one of her own. She even hired a Hebrew to nurse the child and that nurse turned out to be Moses' own mother.

This story highlights not only Jochebed's willingness to defy Pharaoh's command, but also her faith to let go of her son in the hopes that God would protect him and provide for him. It also underscores the courage of Pharaoh's daughter to risk death by directly disobeying the order of her father the King, not just once, but every day with every motherly act for the rest of her life.

Consider the Widow of Zarephath.¹⁴ Widowed by the death of her husband and left alone to raise and provide for her child, God sends the prophet Elijah to seek help from her. She has almost no food left; only a little left to feed herself and her son. Yet Elijah has the *audacity* to ask her to prepare food for him. Though flour and oil are in short supply, she is long on faith and she trusts God to provide according to God's promise. She provides for the prophet out of her meager resources and God continues to refill the jars, making sure they have enough to eat until the rains come and with them, the harvest.

Consider the Syrophenician woman whose child was possessed by an unclean spirit, and how she crept to the place where Jesus was eating with his friends and disciples, and how she asked him to heal her daughter. Remember the answer Jesus gave her and how cruel his words sounded at first blush; that "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Remember, too, how bold she was to answer back and how persistent she was to answer wisely saying "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," and how Jesus changed his tune and made her daughter well.¹⁵

And of course, consider Mary, who was too young and too inexperienced; who was not yet married and who, by law could have been put to death for becoming pregnant while she was betrothed. And yet she accepted that risk and allowed herself to become a vessel through which God would pour out grace, and mercy, and steadfast love over the whole world.

We tend to see God as male; as a strong father figure, as Lord and King, but these are just human concepts that help us to personalize and wrap our heads around the great mystery of God that is too

broad and too high and too deep for us to fully comprehend. And for many of us, those images work. But what if they don't? What if our real experiences of love and courage and provision and salvation have been through the women in our lives? Well then seeing God as female and describing God in feminine terms and with feminine pronouns is perfectly acceptable. The Bible itself uses such feminine imagery to help us understand what God is like.

And in our mothers and the people who have filled the role of mother in our lives, God has acted to bless us beyond what we may be able to understand. So, let us give thanks for the ways that God's has blessed us in and through our mothers and the women in our lives. And if seeing God as mother, and if praying "Our Mother who art in heaven" draws you closer to God and helps you to see and feel the grace and mercy and steadfast love of God more fully, then that is fitting.

To Go be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Chong, Shiao. "Biblical Maternal Images for God." *The Junia Project*, The Junia Project, 7 May 2016, juniaproject.com/biblical-maternal-images-for-god/.

² Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34, NRSV

³ Deuteronomy 32:11-12, NRSV

⁴ Hosea 13:8, NRSV

⁵ Isaiah 66:13, NRSV

⁶ Isaiah 49:15, NRSV

⁷ Isaiah 42:14, NRSV

⁸ Genesis 12:1-3, NRSV

⁹⁹ Genesis 18:1-15, NRSV

¹⁰ Exodus 17:1-10, NRSV

¹¹ 1 Samuel 15:10-23, NRSV

¹² Genesis 4, NRSV

¹³ Exodus 1:15-2:10, NRSV

¹⁴ 1 Kings 17:8-24, NRSV

¹⁵ Mark 7:24-30, NRSV