

## God is our Mother too

### Mother's Day sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor of Church of the Covenant 5/12/19

I think in today's society, people forget that God transcends gender but yet embodies what we have categorized as gender traits. People often feel better referring to God as male, or even gender neutral, but many in Christian culture are new to the idea of referring to God as female. Pop singer Ariana Grande even has a song entitled "God is a Woman." I think us beginning a conversation on God's nature, and embracing both the paternal and maternal aspects of our Creator is nothing short of a healthy task.

But we need to stray far from scripture in order to understand that God has often been re-cast in a maternal role:

Numbers 11:2 and Deuteronomy 32:18 both refer to God "giving birth"

Several times in the book of Job, which is the most ancient of our texts, refers to God as having a womb.

And the word for God's Spirit, or the Holy Spirit—God's Pneuma, the Greek word used in Christian scripture, is a female word. There seems to be little debate at least scripturally that God revealed himself in a bi gender fashion, at times paternal—fatherly, at times maternal—motherly. The debate has often arisen culturally instead.

My hope is that today we can truly illuminate the motherliness of God. There is a tenderness in the role of mother, traditionally. In our stories we tell, we often refer to our mothers as the one we first confide in, those deep intimate secrets. Though, this certainly isn't true for all of us. In our earliest childhood memories we scraped our knee, and we often ran to our mothers for comfort. There is something gentle and comforting we instinctually crave from our mothers—and there is also something often resilient about our mothers and how protective they can be. This is also occurs in nature around us, and because of it we have inherited such metaphorical language like "she's a momma bear with her cubs." Being a mother is no easy task, there is a unique bond between her and her child when the child has come directly from her body, undoubtedly—a symbiotic relationship during pregnancy certainly creates a bond like no other. There is also something about mothers; they seem to see things we just can't see.

I give the story of Hagar as an example. This was written by Jeannie Marie (Faith Gateway—Oct 9, 2018):

"As the sun rose on the day the world stopped turning for Hagar, Abraham shook his second wife and their son Ishmael awake, holding a packed bag. Abraham "got up early the next morning, prepared food and a container of water, and strapped them on Hagar's shoulders..." (Genesis 21:14a). Upset but resolved, Abraham explained that his first wife Sarah had commanded that he get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah considered Ishmael a threat to the secure future of his second son, Isaac. She must leave, he said. Hagar became a refugee overnight, on the run from people who didn't want her. Forced to flee.

The weight of the pack on her shoulders, and the weight crushing her heart — the fear, the shock, the disbelief — all blurred together as Hagar felt her future slip away. Abraham had no plans for them except to abandon them to the desert with a container of water.

"But Abraham!" I can imagine her whispering, hardly able to breathe, "Sarah gave me to you as your wife so you could have a child. You and Sarah...we... raised Ishmael for thirteen years, all of us believing he was the son God promised you, until Isaac came! Ishmael has only known wealth, honor and love. What will our future be now? How will I provide for him? Who will take care of us? Where will we go?"

When our heart sinks with grief for Hagar and her losses, we remember our own story of a terrifying moment — a conversation, a call, a traumatic experience — when we knew our life would never be the same. And we can also identify with the millions of women on the run from evil instigated by injustice. In places like Sudan, Syria, and Somalia, women and children right now are experiencing the plight of Hagar.

It's a plight that soon shifts from shock to despair, whether we're in Africa or Arkansas. The future stretches out as desolate as a desert, with no water in sight.

*Then he sent her away with their son, and she wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water was gone, she put the boy in the shade of a bush. Then she went and sat down by herself about a hundred yards away. 'I don't want to watch the boy die,' she said, as she burst into tears. — Genesis 21:14b-15*

Hagar wandered aimlessly. Her water ran out. She hid her dreams behind a bush so she didn't have to see her future die. And she cried. We *are* Hagar sometimes. Refugees are *always* Hagar, sitting in the wilderness of a new country, placing the things important to them one hundred yards from their heart so they don't have to watch them die. They're not sure how they're going to survive because they've run out of "water", the basic things they need to survive, like jobs, language, and the means to keep getting food, clothing and shelter. Many refugees find themselves later face-down in the place they've landed, crying.

But then came another twist in the story for Hagar. A good plot twist this time. God wants to be famous for His compassion. He wants the world to know that He sees and loves people who are helpless, oppressed, and vulnerable (Numbers 14:18, Deuteronomy 10:18-19, Isaiah 1:17) and that it is His nature to come to their rescue.

*But God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, 'Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants.' — Genesis 21:17-18*

Comfort came first, when the angel asked her to reveal the reason for her tears. He calmed her fears, telling her not to be afraid. He gave her assurance of God's nearness and instant accessibility when the angel said God heard her son's crying. He then planted a seed of new dreams and told her to revive the boy's hope by revealing God's good plans for her son's future. Later, the Bible says that the Lord was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness (Genesis 20:20) and he did indeed become a father of many nations (Genesis 25:12-16).

When we find our tears staining the scorching sand of a desert, we too, can be sure that God wants to comfort us, is moved by our tears, and wants to reveal the plans for our good future. The future is not just far away, but also practical and in the present. God delighted to expand Hagar's perspective on an impossible situation.

*Then God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well full of water. She quickly filled her water container and gave the boy a drink. — Genesis 21:19*

Here's the thing to notice: The water well existed all along. Maybe for a hundred years. God didn't make the well appear out of nowhere. Hagar just didn't see it. God opened her eyes to provision right in front of her. I can imagine God saying, "I know something you don't know. Trust Me. Look! There's a well right there in front of you. Let Me show you." Hagar instantly filled up her container with the water, and crawled back across the desert to revive her son."

Now that is the maternal connecting with the maternal, creator to mother and mother to creator. Our world is full of mothers who sacrifice everything to give life to their children. The refugee mother is a powerful example and an ancient one. Today you will find mothers traveling thousands of miles over horrible landscapes, deserts, mountains, hot and cold, desperate and without food and water, sacrificing everything to give their child a chance to live.

We must remember that God sees things we can't see. God sees the water below the ground. There is a symbiotic relationship that we too have with our divine mother, our Creator, Mother Nature, whatever name you have for her. Embrace her spirit, her love, her essence, and know she is around us and in us... and today, acknowledge that maternal spirit in the mothers, whether gender conforming or not, those who fill that maternal role in our lives—the one who welcomes the stranger, and never gives up. Our mothers are alive, if not in this world, then through us. And if your mother was not an example of these things, you most certainly are, newly, as a course correction of our maternal obligation to love all, see all, accept all. Be the mother, embrace the mother. God's peace, shalom