

## SERMON: “Mothering God”

First United Church, Waterloo

LENT II

Sunday, March 13, 2022

*Prayer: “God of steadfast love, draw us to your side and help us take you more faithfully to heart. Guard us and guide us as we journey with Jesus. Feed us by your Word. Lead us in Christ’s way. We pray in his name. Amen”*

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So here we are on our way again, journeying with Jesus through this season of Lent.

And, like little children on a road trip, we may already be feeling moved to ask,

“Are we there yet?”

No, we aren’t; and there is still quite a piece to go.

A little over one-third of the way into the gospel of Luke, Jesus reaches a critical turning point.

*“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51.)*

Before we even reach the grand finale, Jesus and Luke the gospel writer are anticipating it.

But there is still quite a piece to go before crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension take place.

### I WARNING AND LAMENT

Several furlongs further down that road, we meet Jesus at another critical moment.

He has just finished delivering a teaching on the value of entering “through the narrow door” when some Pharisees rush up and try to deter him from pressing forward:

*“Get away from here! Herod wants to kill you.” (13:31)*

Not all Pharisees were cool and scheming towards Jesus,

some, like this bunch, were warm and sought to be protective.

Perhaps Jesus is in the vicinity of Tiberias, the governing centre of Galilee.

Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, and a nasty piece of work,

has jurisdiction over that province.

Jesus will not be intimidated by him nor frightened by his threats:

*“Go tell that fox (a destructive creature in Jewish literature),*

*‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.*

*Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way,*

*because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem’.” (Luke 13:32-33)*

Herod can huff, puff, and threaten all he wants. Jesus will not be put off by that big, bad wolf.

He will press on through Galilee and take the southern roads leading to Jerusalem.

And oh, just the thought of that corrupted and wayward holy city drives Jesus close to tears:

*“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!” (Luke 13:34)*

Has Jesus been present in Jerusalem before and Luke just doesn’t tell us about those trips?

Or is Luke, who knows how the story ends, telegraphing a done deal in advance?

Is Jesus exercising prophetic foresight aware of how Jerusalem was the centre of a nation that paid little heed to the likes of Elijah, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, *et al*?

Is Jesus here representing in the flesh the compassionate heart of God?

In the apocryphal book of II Esdras 1:28-30, God is pictured weeping over Jerusalem:

*“I was to you as a father is to sons, as a mother to daughters, or a nurse to children ... as a hen gathering her brood under her wings.”*

And could it also be that Jesus is aching for Jerusalem to turn things around, come to her true senses, and be open to really receiving the reign of God before he gets there?

Any of these understandings or some combination of them is possible.

But what Jerusalem and its political and religious officialdom and its adherents couldn't fathom was a loser Messiah intent on dying.

They wanted a reign of God in terms they commonly understood:

freedom and new security by means of right-handed power –

top-down management, tow-the-line controls, imposed force, power-“overing”.

Liberation and transformation Jesus-style comes by left-handed power:

mysteriously, indirectly, laterally, creative connections and equitable distributing. Power with.

Personally, politically, and spiritually, the people and the nation are not alive or open to transformation through unconditional compassion and self-offering.

It feels too discomfoting, too womb-like.

They will run from it, reject it, like chicks who don't want to be gathered by a mother hen God.

## II PSYCHOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL ANXIETIES

Those same psychological and political anxieties present in that first-century, are still present and in evidence in our 21<sup>st</sup>-century world.

For some, the first hurdle to surmount is having a feminine image of Jesus/God.

We have been embracing inclusive language in this United Church of ours since the mid-1980s, but we aren't all fully there yet.

Just throw the words “and Mother” in brackets into an updated version of our Lord's Prayer, and one can still get some kick-back.

For those who grew up with an abusive father or an absentee father, imaging God as Mother has more validity, sits far more comfortably.

No one is making it up. Images of God as mother or in feminine modes are interspersed throughout the Bible.

But which ones, if any, work for us? And which ones niggle or unsettle us?

God as mother bear ever ready to fiercely protect her cubs. 1 Does that sit all right?

What about the God who births and breast-feeds her children or dandles them on her knee? 2

Does God as Dame Wisdom in the book of Proverbs fit your spiritual psyche? Or not? 3

Can you get your head and heart around God as homemaker or baker-woman 4? Is that easier?

How about God as midwife 5? The church of Christ as midwife? Our ministry as midwifery?

Then there is the God who is all for the birds: Mother Eagle or Mother Hen. 6

Many of us maybe quite okay with a God-as-eagle who affords us empowerment:

kicking us out of the nest, teaching us to fly, fostering our independence,

but that snuggling up close Mother Hen God? For many, she is unsettling. She reawakens the child within us. She forces us to confront our shortcomings, our failings, our continued need for nurture and protection. The psychological and spiritual angst is that we fear being known to the uttermost. We run from or resist the very reassurance or rehabilitation we deep down know we actually need. There are soft-boiled people who like to run when unsavory feelings show up. In the shelter of God's wings, those who are discomforted when they feel loathing, anger, or hostility; who balk at self-assertion can channel unsettling emotions into positive power. There are also hard-boiled people who flee when soft feelings arise within them. Under God's hen-like wings, those who are afraid to be vulnerable, tearful, or nurturing; who balk at self-surrender, can channel their discomforts into strengths. Eagle imagery is about mobility and freedom, soaring, and external adventures. Hen imagery, like the hen-house, is about shadows, stillness and internal explorations. We need both. We need to find, test out, and develop our strengths. We also need a safe place to wrestle with and learn from our weaknesses. The unconditional love of a mother-hen God offers us a zone of safety and security for creative engagement with characteristics our culture considers negative or not for public display. Cuddled under God's hen-like wings we can find our own wholeness and freedom from fear of others or our own true selves.

The socio-political bonus of this feminine God is that she loves both the disempowered and the powerful. The embrace of a hens' wing is a call to Christ's church to continue her relentless appeal to and pursuit of the last, the lost, the least, and most vulnerable of the world. They cannot be left hung out to dry, to fend for themselves or to suffer in isolation. Feel free to adopt any marginalized group and join in mission in the pursuit of justice: working out reconciliation and restorative justice for our aboriginal peoples; continuing to live into what it means to be an Affirming congregation where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, transitioning, transsexual, pansexual, asexual; and twin-spirited persons, and non-binary identifying persons find not only safe space, but are valued and celebrated as gifted children of God among other gifted children of God. Build on befriending the poor and homeless and advocating for affordable housing, sufficient income; ministering to seniors who are frightfully lonely, or eking out an existence on a pension income just a smidgeon of dollars above the poverty line. How about farm families in our nation in crisis? For starters, it may soon be safe enough to invite these our neighbours to spill their concerns over coffee and muffins in the church hall.

God's mother hen wings are also stretched out to enfold those who hold seats of power despite their resistance and intransigence. She yearns to re-orient them.

She weeps over those who even use religion to further their own ends.  
 Think of those who pervert Dr. Martin Luther King's visionary words, "I have a dream".  
 Rather than galvanizing people towards changing an unjust and prejudicial social order,  
 these politicians have their own benefit in view or the lusts of their own egos.  
 Our world is currently reeling as yet another imperialistic tyrant is on the loose.  
 A recent podcast between an American journalist and an astronomer investigating life elsewhere  
 in the universe, led Rev. Cameron Trimble to offer words of reflection and challenge:  
*"For (over two weeks) now we have seen terror and heartbreak unraveling in Ukraine.  
 Russia is invading Ukraine in an unprovoked attack, destroying the lives of millions of people.  
 The US and European allies are tripping themselves up with identity and responsibility.  
 "You are a member of NATO; you are not." "You are part of the EU; you are not."  
 Our definitions of belonging are falling flat in the face of human tragedy.  
 When innocent people are dying, who cares who is part of a particular club or not?  
 Surely we can be more creative.  
 Humans have always had this challenge.  
 We want to draw bounded lines to define ourselves and our people.  
 We use land, heritage, skin color, gender, class, age, sex, religion, orientation,  
 and privilege of all kinds to declare who matters and who doesn't.  
 But our boundaries never hold because they were never honest or true.  
 In the very first book of our bible, we read that God created all that exists.  
 At the end of each day, God looked at God's creation and said, "It is good."  
 On the sixth day, God looked at the sum total of all that exists  
 and said, "It is VERY good" (Genesis 1:31).  
 All that exists belongs—everything is connected. Everything is One." 7*  
 The astronomer's shared truth was that, in the scheme of the cosmos, we are all earthlings.  
 Jesus yet weeps and God yet yearns: *"How many times? How many times have I desired  
 to gather your children together as a hen gather her brood under her wings?"*  
 Come on, citizens and leaders of today's Jerusalems, do you think we might make more strides  
 in turning around the way we do politics and business in our world today?  
 Can we learn to develop and exercise left-handed power, co-operative, compassionate power?  
 The power of a loser Messiah who invites us to die to the way things are and have been,  
 so that God's new ways and God's alternative realm can rise up in replacement?  
 The kind of power that can make living in right relationships a reality in creation?

## CONCLUSION

I know, we aren't there yet. There is yet quite a way to go.  
 But personally, and socially, God in Christ remains determined to lead us to that new Jerusalem.  
 It is an invitation to journey down the road that leads to liberation and transformation,  
 so that wholeness of life and newness of life can truly happen.  
 It is a journey that calls us to some surrender, to some letting go, and to being gathered in  
 so that we might be loved to the utmost and then re-released to truly help all things become new.  
 Back in the Middle Ages, St. Anselm, who became the Archbishop of Canterbury  
 from 1093 to 1109, composed a prayer totally in spirit with today's gospel text.

In part, it runs:

*“Thou soul, dead of thyself, run under the wings of Jesus thy Mother,  
and bewail under her feathers thine afflictions.*

*Beg that she heal thy wounds and restore thee to life.*

*Mother Christ, who gatherest thy chicks under thy wings,  
this dead chick puts himself under thy wing.” 7*

Update the language if you wish, but a prayer like that  
may be a means of setting the pace for our journey.

Neither we, nor our world have yet arrived at the new Jerusalem.

With prayer, patience, persistence, and proclamation we might get closer;

we might just create a world that pays attention to its prophets

we might just find ourselves gathered in and loved into newness by a mother hen God.

Go ahead, take thirty seconds or so to imagine it.

Close your eyes and sense that you are coddled, snuggled, held by this mothering God

That would be cause for “Glory, glory, Hallelujah!” Wouldn’t it?

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### Notes

1 Hosea 13:8

2 Isaiah 42:14; Deuteronomy 32:18; Job 38:28-29; cf. John 16:21, Romans 8:22 [Birth].  
Isaiah 49:15; Numbers 11:12-13; Hosea 11:4 [Nursing]. Hosea 11:3-4 [Parenting]

3 Proverbs 1:20-33; Proverbs 8; Proverbs 9:1-6, and many other texts.

4 Psalm 123:2, cf. Luke 15:8-10 and Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:20-21, cf. John 6:31-35

5 Isaiah 66:9; Psalm 22:9-10

6 Deuteronomy 32:11-12; Exodus 19:4; Job 39:27-30 [Eagle]; Hen, today’s text.

7 Cameron Trimble, “We Are Stardust”, Convergence Weekly, March 3, 2022.

cameron@convergenceus.org via infusionmail.com

8 Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother, (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA:  
1982), p. 114.

