

Our Feminine God

Genesis 1:27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

^{NRS} **Job 38:1** Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: ² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its measurements-- surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ⁸ "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?-- ⁹ when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band,

^{NRS} **Matthew 23:37** "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!

^{NRS} **Romans 16:13** Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother-- a mother to me also.

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We need to think about God and gender. We have a hard time picturing something that we can't see. If we can't use at least one of our senses to experience something, we have a much harder time picturing it or relating to it in some way. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Well, spirit is a little difficult to picture in our minds. Scripture sometimes describes God in human terms. Genesis 3:8 says that Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden." It's much easier to think of God as a much larger, more powerful, eternal version of ourselves. So, when Michelangelo painted the Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, God is shown as a large, muscular, gray-bearded man.

While we tend to picture God in our image, it's important to remember that we are made in God's image. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." If we are created male and female - and we are created in God's image, then the implication is that God is either without gender and blessed us with a bit of additional creative artistry - or God encompasses both genders in some way. While God is most often referred to in male terms, that's certainly not always the case. In the thirty-second chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses sings a long song about the relationship between God and his people and sometimes refers to God with feminine images. Verse 13 speaks of God nursing us. Moses criticizes the people saying, "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." (Deut. 32:18) Bearing and giving birth are feminine images. More than that, they are images of motherhood.

In the book of Job, Job has suffered one calamity after another. His so-called friends tell him that he must have really sinned badly to deserve so much suffering. Job, on the other hand, knows that he's been a faithful and righteous servant of God. He's perplexed and angry about his problems and he wants an answer from God about all that he has suffered. Then, in chapter thirty-eight, God begins to answer Job. God asks over and over, "Were you around when I created the world? In verses eight and nine, God is self-described as giving birth to and swaddling the sea, clouds, and darkness. Again, God is described in feminine and motherhood images.

Later in the same chapter, God uses both male and female images in adjacent verses. "Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? ²⁹ From whose womb did the ice

come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?" While father and begotten are masculine, womb and giving birth are absolutely feminine.

The first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs talks a lot about Wisdom. Wisdom is a feminine word. Especially in the eighth chapter, we find the thought that Wisdom was with or was part of God from the very beginning of the process of creation. In some ways the passage reads a bit like the first chapter of John's Gospel, where we are told that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And so in Proverbs we read of feminine imagery in reference to God.

The prophet Isaiah also tells us that God uses feminine images to describe herself. In chapter 42 God says, "I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant." Later on in Isaiah, in chapter 66 we run into more feminine and motherhood images of God. Verse 9 reads, "Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God." A few verses later, the text reads, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

Across the breadth of the Old Testament, in Genesis, in Deuteronomy, Job, Proverbs, and Isaiah, we find God described, sometimes in self-description, as having feminine characteristics and actions. Interestingly enough, Jesus does the same sort of thing in the gospel of Matthew, where he says, "If only you had been willing, I would have gathered you under my wings like a momma hen gathers her chicks." That's a pretty maternal image!

So, where does the exploration of all of these feminine and motherly images of God take us? While we're in the New Testament, let's take a small side trip to get some insight into the place of women in the early church. This might also redeem a bit of the Apostle Paul's reputation. At the end of the book of Romans, Paul sends his greetings to a lot of people. In that list of folks are several women including a deacon and an apostle.

Phoebe, a deacon
 Prisca (Pricilla), a co-worker
 Mary (hard worker)
 Junia, an apostle
 Tryphaena
 Tryphosa
 Persis (beloved)
 Julia
 The sister of Nereus
 Mother of Rufus

The greeting in verse thirteen is a bit unusual. He sends his greeting to Rufus and to Rufus' mother and says that she is his mother, too. Some translations say that she is like a mother to him, others imply that she is his mother. I think the Greek says that she is Paul's mother as well as Rufus' mother. The point here is this. Either way, Paul is the only writer in the New Testament who pauses to say, "Hi, Mom. Love ya!"

There are lessons to be learned from all of these passages. Now, the gender thing can be awkward. From the scriptures we've looked at, it's just as appropriate to refer to God as "she" as it is to say "he." If God keeps talking about God's womb, then "she" has got to be appropriate. We usually say "he" out of tradition and habit. Using "she" for God can be so distracting for some of us that are set in our ways, that we may not hear anything else that's being said. I wish I had a good grammatical answer to all of this. It certainly points to how human language - and English in particular - is too limited to speak clearly about the divine.

Second, we men shouldn't get too hung up on gender roles and what's appropriate for women but not for men. If Jesus was willing and eager to fuss over folks like an old mother hen, then we shouldn't feel like nurturing and protecting are somehow outside our masculine

role in life. Don't let your desire to fit our culture's image of what it means to be manly get in the way of being compassionate and loving like Jesus.

Third, some years ago, I was reading the introduction to an important Christian book. The author explained that he understood the issues regarding using gender pronouns in reference to God. He announced that he had decided to continue using male terms with reference to God because it was traditional and because he felt like men were still in great need of a good fatherhood example to look up to and emulate. I'm sure we men do have a great need for that. But it would be shortchanging women to fail to point out that God offers a similar opportunity to them.

Fourth, realizing that God is not exclusively male can free women from feeling inferior and subservient to men. One of my favorite Baptist ministers is Tony Campolo. His wife's name is Peggy. She said to him one time years ago that she was sometimes a little overwhelmed by some of the people that she met when traveling with him. Tony suggested that she should give some thought to what she was doing in her life that she thought was important and to think of some way to be able to express it. Later on, on another trip, someone asked Peggy, "And what do you do, Mrs. Campolo?" Peggy replied, "I am nurturing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time." To which the other person said, "O, my, I'm just a lawyer."

I'd like for all women to please stand. Please recite together the declaration on the screen:

I am a woman. As a woman, I am created in God's image. Like my Rock, my Redeemer, my God, womanhood is part of who I am. Womanhood is about love and life, about creating and sustaining, about comforting and protecting, even when unmasked or ignored. Womanhood is about leadership, wisdom, strength, and compassion. God is perfect at this. I am not. Nonetheless, I am proud and honored for this to be part of my call in God's service. Amen.

We are all made in God's image,
both female and male.
Know that in your heart and be freed to live
as whole and complete children of God.

^{NRS} **John 4:24** God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

^{NRS} **Genesis 3:8** They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Deuteronomy 32:13 CEB¹³ God made Israel glide over the highlands; he fed him with food from the field, nursed him with honey from a boulder, with oil from a hard rock:

^{NRS} **Deuteronomy 32:17** They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared.¹⁸ You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.

^{NRS} **Job 38:28** "Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew?²⁹ From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?"

^{NRS} **Isaiah 42:14** For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.

^{NRS} **Isaiah 44:24** Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth;

^{NRS} **Isaiah 66:9** Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God.

^{NRS} **Isaiah 66:13** As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.