

"Our Heavenly Parent"

(Family Matters part #5)

Proverbs 1:20-23, 3:13-20

[62] Good morning. What a privilege it is to be worshipping together with you in the house of God this morning. Would you do me a favor this morning? Turn to your neighbor and tell them, "Following Jesus is not easy, but it is worth it." Go ahead.

Following Jesus is worth it. We are here today because we believe that. We believe our mission is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." We exist as a church to invite all people to a living, loving relationship with Jesus Christ for the glory of God. Our purpose is printed in our bulletin every Sunday, but it's still a good thing to remind ourselves what we are here for. Will you please pray with me?

God Almighty, with wisdom you laid the earth's foundations, and by understanding you set the heavens in place. Through your Son, Jesus Christ, you created the church where your Word would be proclaimed. We simply ask that you open our minds now; give us a new word from your Spirit, so that we can be filled with confidence to proclaim your wondrous love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

[63] For the last few weeks, we have been following a series called "Family Matters." As a church, we are asking, "How can we grow and strengthen our families in faith?" We've talked about encouragement, dangerous prayers, confessing our doubts, and choosing for our families to worship God.

I hope these stories are helping you and strengthening your family. I hope you are finding something you can apply in your life each time.

[64] Today I want us to examine what images we normally use when we teach our children about God. Let me start by asking this question: What names do you normally call God? (*I would expect answers like "Heavenly Father", "Creator", "Lord", "King of Kings".*) Great answers. My follow up question is: How many of those names are distinctly paternal? That is, how many of them are masculine, male? Most if not all of them. I will be the first to confess that when I refer to God, I almost always use pronouns like "He", "Him", and "His." After all, it is biblical, isn't it?

[65] Whoa. Some of you are thinking, “Pastor, where are you going with this?” Hang with me for a moment. Will someone please read Genesis 1:26? “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” I have a question this morning. If both men and women were formed in God’s image, why are our images of God only masculine?

As you chew on that question from a moment, allow me to read an excerpt from The Shack, a book by Paul Young. In this story, a man named Mack is wrestling with a huge trauma. He believes God has invited him to the cabin in the wilderness where his young daughter was murdered. This excerpt is from the part where God first appears to Mack.

[66] *(page 84) – What should you do when you come to the door of a house, or a cabin in this case, where God might be? Should you knock? Presumably God already knew that Mack was there. Maybe he ought to simply walk in and introduce himself, but that seemed equally absurd. And how should he address him? Should he call him “Father,” or “Almighty One,” or perhaps “Mr. God,” and would it be best if he fell down and worshipped?....*

...he walked up to the door. Mack decided to bang loudly and see what happened, but just as he raised his fist to do so, the door flew open, and he was looking directly into the face of a large, beaming African-American woman.

Instinctively he jumped back, but he was too slow. With speed that belied her size, she crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms, lifting him clear off his feet and spinning him around like a little child. And all the while she was shouting his name—“Mackenzie Allen Phillips”—with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply loved relative. She finally set him back on Earth and, with her hands on his shoulders, pushed him back as if to get a good look at him.

“Mack, look at you!” she fairly exploded. “Here you are and so grown up. I have really been looking forward to seeing you face-to-face. It is so wonderful to have you here with us. My, my, my, how I do love you!” And with that she wrapped herself around him again.¹

¹ Young, William P, Wayne J. B. Cummings, Wayne Jacobsen, and Brad Cummings. *The Shack*. Windblown Media, 2008.

[67] I'm guessing, if you're like me, that you are a little surprised at the author's depiction of God. Here's my point: I'm not trying to make God into a female, but I believe that a healthy image of God includes both paternal and maternal qualities. Most of the imagery we know of God from the Bible is clearly masculine. "Father. Lord. King of Kings. Mr. God." (OK, that last one isn't in the Bible.) So I want to invite you along a journey this morning to hear some of the scripture that reveals the maternal nature of God.

[68] Let's start with Proverbs 1:20: "*Out in the open wisdom calls aloud, she raises her voice in the public square...*" Proverbs 3:15 continues: "*She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.*"

Lady Wisdom cries aloud in the streets. The Greek word for "wisdom" is... (Anyone care to guess?) Sophia. In some languages (besides English), nouns have gender. Sophia is, in fact, feminine. This scripture is the reference for the song, "Lord, You are more precious than silver, and nothing I desire compares to you."

Proverbs describes God's wisdom as having a distinctly feminine nature. The ancient Hebrew people would not have understood these passages as explicitly describing God, but Sophia would have fulfilled a need for female imagery of the divine without compromising their understanding of Yahweh.² This is just one instance of a female voice of God in the Bible.

[69] So, God's wisdom may be a feminine word, but are there actual scriptures that describe God like a mother to her children? (I'm glad you asked.) Here are three examples from the prophet Isaiah.

[70] Isaiah 42:14: "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant."

Isaiah 49:15: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

[71] And Isaiah 66:13: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

In these verses, God's passion for God's people is compared to a mother in labor pains. God's compassion for us is like a mother nursing her children. We

² Harper Collins Bible Commentary, 450.

talk about God as our Creator, our Sustainer, and our Comforter, someone who nurtures children. What better image than a mother for all of those?

Has your mother ever comforted you? Can anyone here testify that when a child falls down and skins their knees, their first cry is always a tearful, “Mommy!”? Yeah, dads, I know we can try, but we will always be second fiddle to mom with her Band-Aids and her kisses. Well, God is the Ultimate Comforter, a heavenly Mother who heals our spiritual wounds.

[72] There are still more verses that compare God’s care and comfort to that of a mother bird.

Psalms 17:8 - “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.”

[73] And Psalm 57:1 “Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.”

[74] In Deuteronomy 32:10-11 we read: “In a desert land [God] found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.”

Can you see God as a giant mother bird? One of my favorite childhood books was [Are You My Mother?](#) By Dr. Seuss. Like that book, I find it incredibly reassuring to imagine God as a mother bird hiding me under God’s wings. I can just feel the warmth and shelter.

[75] Even Jesus used a similar image to describe his compassion for Jerusalem, while on his way to the cross. In Matthew 23:37, Jesus said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

[76] Understand, God as a mother is not only soft and gentle, but also protective of God’s children, like any good mother is. Hosea has one of the best descriptions of the fierce protectiveness of God. Listen to what God would do to enemies of God’s children from Hosea 13:8: “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open; like a lion I will devour them—a wild animal will tear them apart.”

Wow, I want God as my protector! A mother bear? That’s powerful. Don’t get between God and God’s kids!

[77] What is the point of all of this? Am I saying, “Don’t ever use the pronouns He, Him, and His to talk about God?” Am I saying we should start saying, “Our Mother, who art in heaven”? Not at all. Jesus taught us to refer to God as “Father.” Jesus called God, “Abba.” (Mark 14:26) which means “Dad.” Jesus taught his disciples to pray, saying, “Our Father in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9)

The point is, our relationships with our fathers, for good or for bad, shape how we relate to God. Like the character Mack in the The Shack, we might have had terrible, abusive relationships with our dads. In that case, understanding God solely as a male can hinder, even damage those who think that their earthly fathers are supposed to be a perfect example of God. On the other hand, knowing that God has both male and female characteristics may help us to fill holes in our lives that our own earthly parents can’t.

Children need healthy relationships with both their moms and dads, although that might not always be possible. If we can show our children that God loves them like a father and like a mother, we double their chances of entering a loving relationship with their Creator, Protector, and Redeemer.

If you haven’t read The Shack, I apologize for the following spoiler. At the end of the book, God appears to Mack again, but this time as an old man, because Mack is ready for it. Before that point, such an encounter would have not helped Mack. I’m not saying we should remake God into whatever image we find convenient. I am saying, though, that we should never restrict our image of God to just one person, female or male. It’s not either-or. It’s both-and. Male and female were created in God’s image. We all bear God’s image, because God is our Creator. That means that all of us, men and women, can be the hands and feet of Christ to the world. If our families are to be strong, then they need to know God is bigger than our labels.

In the end, neither image of God as a father nor as a mother is truly complete. God has both qualities. God is everything you ever needed from your father and from your mother. We may disagree on the true nature of God, but there is one image that is spot on describing God’s love. It’s not male or female. It’s right behind me. It’s the cross. The ultimate example of God’s love is shown

to us in the person of Jesus Christ who died to save us from our sins. That is an image that will never change, whether God is a Him or a Her to you. My prayer for you is that you would know God as your Heavenly Parent, knowing that whatever need you have in your life, God can fulfill it.

Would you pray with me?

MEMORY VERSE:

Isaiah 66:13: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What is your primary image of God: a father, a mother, or someone else?
2. Have you ever heard God referred to as female? How did you feel or react?
3. In what ways is God like a mother to you? In what ways is God like a father?
4. How is it helpful to be more inclusive in our terminology of God? How is it more confusing?
5. How can you help someone understand that God is both our heavenly Father and Mother?