

**Café (boldcafe.org)** is a monthly on-line magazine for young adult women made possible from support from women's groups active in Women of the ELCA, the women's organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

## God as mother

by Michelle Terry

*My 3- and 5-year-old sons are playing superheroes again. In the heat of battle against the "bad dudes," my 3-year-old sustains an injury. Being a superhero is a dangerous line of work. Immediately, he turns back into my preschool son, and he's tugging at my legging, tears streaming down his face, expecting words of comfort, hugs, and kisses. Of course, that is exactly what he gets. My kisses still hold magic for him, and he's off bringing down the powers of evil again in no time.*

### Part of me

My 10-month-old son is upset, probably a result of the two teeth coming in at the same time. With a worried brow, he locks his eyes with mine and whines. As soon as he latches, he calms down and settles into a deep sleep. As he sleeps, my mind wanders back to when they were kicking and rolling around in my womb. I delight in the memories of them, when they were still physically a part of me. I found great joy in knowing they were growing from a few cells to the screaming, plump babies that greeted us on their birthdays.

Their birthdays did not come without some blood, sweat, and tears. My oldest son's arrival was the worst of the three. The pain was disorienting and scary; I had never experienced anything remotely close. I will be forever grateful for the nurse on duty, who talked me through the contractions and helped me successfully birth my firstborn. I can still hear her voice, giving me direction and assuring me that everything was going to be fine.

### Motherly depictions of God

Until recently, these experiences were all just a part of "a day in the life of. . ." some precious memories to me, others were so routine that they blur with countless other instances of the same. But a few well-timed cues from the Holy Spirit, and I am seeing these things through a new light.

See, each story I just mentioned aligns with a description of God. A feminine description of God. God as a mother who comforts her child. "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." (Isaiah 66:13) God as nursing mother, (Isaiah 49:15), and God's children as new-

born infants (1 Peter 2:2). God who is pregnant and gives birth (Isaiah 46:3-4, Deuteronomy 32:18, John 3:5). God as a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:14), and God as the midwife delivering a child (Psalm 22:8-10).

There are more examples too. . . God as a mama bear, God as a mother eagle, Jesus as a mother hen, God as a woman looking for her lost coin. The list goes on, and on, and on. But we rarely lift them up in churches, at least not any that I've attended. Until I looked into it, I had no idea there were so many passages that spoke of God in feminine terms.

Even when there was a passage with a feminine description of God, it was not really mentioned. When I learned about the woman looking for a lost coin, I learned that we were the lost coin and God was looking for us. I don't recall anyone asking me to ponder why on earth Jesus chose to compare God to a woman doing housework.

It seems that God has far less of a problem being referred to in the feminine than we have with referring to God in the feminine. We don't talk about God as woman or mother, even though the biblical witness does and even though the saints before us frequently did. We are poorer in our understanding of God for not lifting up those passages.

If you didn't realize it—and some people really don't, because we often only refer to God with male language—God is not a man. God in human form, Jesus, obviously is, so there's that. And we talk about the Trinity in terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But that is just language we use trying to describe the indescribable.

Any language about God is just that... it's about God. It is not God, and it doesn't capture the entirety of God. So leaving out entire chunks of how God is described leaves us with less understanding of God, which is why we should pay attention when God is described in terms of a woman, and as mother.

God comforts us as a mother comforts her child. That deep bond—the one that allows my kisses to retain their magic with my sons for a while longer and the one that still makes my stress melt away at the sound of my mother's voice on the phone—that is a glimpse of the bond God has with us. Since mothers are notoriously imperfect, we can rejoice that even the most beautiful part of our relationships with those who have mothered us is just a hint of God's love for us. How does knowing that shape how we understand God's grace?

## Imagining God

We tend to make our relationship with God so educational! Theology has its vital place in our life with God, so I am not denigrating it. But sometimes we make believing in God more about the head than the heart. What if we thought of our relationship with God less about getting the answers right, and more about being like a newborn? You know what the newborns I have cared for love most in life? Being snuggled up and drinking some of mama's milk. My infant does not know my birthday, or what my favorite color is, or what my interests are ... but he knows me and trusts me unreservedly.

What if we imagined our life with God as a time to get close and receive life-giving nourishment, trusting God in the same sort of way as an infant trusts her mama?

What if we saw God's work in the world similar to a woman in labor pains? Labor is awful, it is horribly painful—and it is beautiful and miraculous. God's redemptive activity in the world might cause pain, both to God and to us. But God's work is also beautiful and miraculous and ultimately produces life.

How does it help us realize God's pervasiveness in our lives to know that God was with us at our births, helping us into the world? Or that God is with us during times when we're being reborn in some capacity, giving direction and cradling our new life in the Divine arms? What if we imagined God during those times, we imagined God encouraging us as the nurse encourages the laboring mother?

Finally, how does it help us understand ourselves to think about God's feminine descriptions? There is not a single woman I know who doesn't struggle with self-acceptance. We're too fat. Or too wrinkly. Or too tired. We fear we're not good enough friends, daughters, spouses, sisters, or mothers.

But we have been made in God's image; male and female God created them (Genesis 1:27). We can rejoice in that and live out our call as women who are God's children without so much worry over being incomplete somehow. God makes us complete. It doesn't mean we never make mistakes and never sin... it does mean that we can stop being so hard on ourselves for not being our (or someone else's) idea of perfect. We can go about even the most mundane parts of our lives knowing that God is involved in all of it.

When we start realizing that God is not contained by any one type of imagery, we grow in our understanding and our relationship with God. We begin to see ourselves as God's beloved treasures; and the tasks of our lives as God's work. And we begin to share the joy that comes from all of that with others, and we find that God has changed not only us but our world.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. Which of the biblical feminine descriptions of God resonates with you? Why?
2. Do you agree that it is important to include female imagery in our understanding of God? Why or why not?
3. Does it make any difference in your self-understanding to think of God in feminine terms? Why or why not?

### **Prayer:**

O God, both Father and Mother of us all, we thank you for the many ways you teach us about yourself. Thank you for nurturing, loving, and protecting us more fiercely than the best mother. Thank you for giving us so many women who reflect you as they nurture, love, and protect those around them. Guide us as we seek to understand and to imitate you in our lives. Amen.

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## Faith reflections: Our mothering God

by Angela T. Kahbeb

*I just got back from the dentist with our 5-year-old son, Konami. A trip to the dentist is rarely a welcomed event for most children, but since our son has autism, it was especially challenging. Because of his limited speech, it is difficult for him to articulate his needs. Recently, Konami had several incidents of biting. Even his school teacher had called us concerned about his behavior. After he had been repeatedly scolded, redirected, and given time-outs because of his biting, he finally said to me, pointing at his tooth, "Mommy, my tooth is broken. My tooth is broken."*

Something was wrong. We went to the dentist confident that the doctor would uncover the problem. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Konami interpreted the strange surroundings as a threat. He had a severe meltdown. He hit me. He kicked me. He bit me. He slapped me. He headbutted me.

The doctor was not able to fully examine Konami's teeth. I left the office feeling battered and beleaguered. But the moment we stepped into the cool spring air, Konami looked at me, faced flushed, nose running, eyes full of tears, voice hoarse from screaming and said, "Sorry, mommy." I knew he meant it. I knew he really meant it. I gave his hand a little squeeze. "I know, sweetheart. I know." I was not angry with him—even during the height of his tirade. A mother's love does not bruise easily (my shins, on the other hand, are a different story). I only wanted what was best for him. After all, I knew he was frightened, confused, and in pain. I understood that he did not understand.

### An unflinching mothering God

Photo by Shutterstock This is how we wrestle with God. Kicking and screaming when we find ourselves in unfamiliar places, scary places, or in pain. When God redirects us for our own good, we respond to God's mothering love with tantrums. We cry out. We bite. We hit. We kick. But our mothering God is unflinchingly, unconditionally devoted to us.

In Helen Steiner Rice's poem, "No Other Love Like Mother's Love," she offers this description: "A Mother's love is something that no one can explain. It is made of deep devotion and of sacrifice and pain. It is patient and forgiving when all others are forsaking and it never fails or falters even though the heart is breaking."

Deep devotion? Sacrifice? Forgiving? These attributes not only describe a mother's love for her child, but also describe God's mothering love for humanity.

Certainly the majority of us are most comfortable and most familiar with God as "Our Father which art in heaven..." But have you ever considered the many Scripture references that illustrate God as our mother? For example, in Matthew 23:37, Jesus himself steps into the role of mother saying, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..." In Hosea 13:8, God is imaged as an angry mother bear defending her cubs.

The prophet Isaiah records God's declaration of giving birth to God's people.

"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." Isaiah 46:3-4

Whenever I read passages like this, I think about all that our mothers have done for us and all that we are willing to do for our children.

In Deuteronomy 32:11-12, we witness God as a majestic mother eagle who "stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads her wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions." These verses paint a picture of our God in unmistakably feminine characteristics that we rarely encounter in our traditional discourse about God.

Aren't these verses a treasure? This rich and amazing imagery reminds us that the God we serve is far beyond our human understanding. Consequently, it is impossible for any one image to fully encapsulate all of who God is.

## **Beyond metaphors**

But whether we image God as Heavenly Father, Loving Mother, or Divine Parent, our words fall short. The moment we lift up any metaphor we begin to recognize its limitations. Our God is beyond male, beyond female. That is why our finite language is severely inadequate when describing our indescribable, infinite God. Unfortunately, words are not our only limitation. Words are linked to our lived experience.

When we hear words like mother or father, our minds naturally go to our own stories. Sadly, too many of us know mothers who are far from the loving mother archetype. Even our God, through the prophet Isaiah, recognizes this painful reality.

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for her womb? Even if these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Isaiah 49:15

Our God, our holy, mysterious, and merciful God is near to us. God is the perfection of the images we use to illustrate God's relationship with humanity. Regardless of our family situations, our earthly parents are human and are subject to the human condition of imperfection. But we serve a God that promises to care for us beyond the limitations of our human-ness.

The psalmist declares, "If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up" (Psalm 27:10). God as mother offers another facet of God's love for humanity. Dwell in that richness.

## **Discussion questions**

1. Are there areas in my life where I am kicking and headbutting God, intent on my own way?
2. Name three attributes that describe your mother. How do these characteristics compare to your under-

standing of who God is and how God interacts with humanity?

3. What, if anything, keeps us from imaging God as Mother?

**Prayer:**

Mothering God,

We give you thanks for your mercies that are new every morning. Increase our hope. Buttress our faith. Teach us to walk in the light of your love. And give us hearts to seek you in unfamiliar places and eyes to see you in unexpected faces. Strengthen the hearts of the weary, especially mothers who desire to model your unfailing love. Continue to shelter and direct us on this awesome journey trusting in your abundant grace, Amen.

*The Rev. Angela T. Khabeb serves as the pastor of St. Peter Lutheran Church in Delphos, Ohio. She has an amazing husband, Benhi, two spectacular sons, Konami and Khenna, and a precious baby girl, Khonni.*

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