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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's tugging at my legging, tears streaming down his face, expecting words of comfort, hugs, and kisses. Of course, that is 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 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 delighted 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 birth days.

Their birth days 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 would be fine.



Motherly depictions of God

Until recently, these experiences were just precious memories to me. Other memories like them are so routine they blur together. Yet, a few well-timed cues from the Holy Spirit put these memories in a new light.

Each memory 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 a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), and God's children as newborn 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. However, we rarely hear these passages in our congregations. So, many people are unaware they exist.

Further, when we often gloss over feminine imagery for God. When I learned about the woman looking for a lost coin, I realized we were the lost coin, and God was looking for us. No one asked me to ponder why Jesus chose to compare God to a woman doing housework.

Scripture and the Christian tradition used feminine language for God frequently. We became reluctant to refer to God in feminine language at some point, and we are poorer for it.

It is true that God in human form, Jesus, is male. We frequently speak of the Trinity in terms of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many churches use only male pronouns for God. But when we use exclusively male language for God, people conclude that God is male.

God is not male or female. God is God. Our language about God is our attempt to describe the indescribable. Any language about God is just that – words. Our words cannot capture God. When we fail to recognize the wide range of descriptions for God, we know less about God. We miss the opportunity to grow in faith.

Imagine God comforting us as a mother comforts her child: The comfort that allows my kisses to work magic on my sons or my mother's voice on the phone to melt my stress. These are glimpses of the bond God has with us. We can rejoice that our relationships with those who have mothered us are 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 intellectual. Theology has a vital place in our life with God. But sometimes, we make believing in God more about the head than the heart. What if we thought our relationship with God is less about getting the answers right and more about being like a newborn?

Do you know what the newborns I have cared for love most in life? They love being snuggled and drinking some of mama's milk. My infant does not know my birthday, my favorite color, or my interests. But he does know my scent, my voice, even my heartbeat. He trusts me absolutely.

What if we imagined our life with God as a time to get close and receive life-giving nourishment? What if we trusted God as an infant trusts her mama?

Can you imagine God's work in the world as a woman in labor? Labor is painful, but it is also 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.

Does it help us realize that God was with us at our births, urging us into the world? Or that God is with us during times when we are reborn, giving direction and cradling our new life in Divine arms? Can you think of God encouraging us as the nurse encourages the laboring mother?

When you see God as feminine, does that help you understand yourself? Almost every woman I know struggles 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. We can live out our call as God's children without worry about being incomplete. God makes us complete. We will still make mistakes and sin, but we can allow ourselves the grace and forgiveness God gives so freely.

As we expand our understanding of God, we grow in our relationship with God. It becomes easier to see ourselves as God's beloved treasure and the tasks of our lives as God's work. And we share the resulting deep joy with others. God has changed us, and in changing us, has changed the 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?



Closing prayer:

○ God, both Mother and Father 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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Mother figures

by Elyssa Salinas-Lazarski


Six years ago, I wrote about mother figures. I was thinking about the women who had been mother figures in my life, but I had not yet felt my own womb expand.

Now I am a mother of two. The c-section scars still feel new to my body as my children learn to walk and talk. I was given a mug with a mama bear on it before my daughter was born, which I thought was a cute image. But I did not put much stock into the notion of a bear as an image for motherhood. Then when I became a mother, I found a fierceness that I did not expect. It almost felt as though the world came into focus in a new way, and protecting this child was the most crucial part of my life.

When I think about this fierce protectiveness, I think of the women at the beginning of Exodus who defied the power surrounding them, as they became mother figures for Moses. I first think of Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who defied the Pharaoh's orders and kept baby boys alive. They lied to Pharaoh to protect children that they helped bring into this world, ". . . the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live" (Exodus 1:17). Some protect children before they are born; the midwives, doulas, doctors, nurses, and all those who give their great wisdom and help guide children into the world.

I think about Jochebed, the woman who gave birth to Moses. She hid her son for three months before placing him into the river, hoping God would protect her child. "When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river" (Exodus 2:3). Some give birth to us, the mothers who held us in their wombs and protect us with their own skin. Sometimes we grow up with them, and sometimes they give us our best chance in the arms of other mother figures.

I think about Miriam, who watched over her baby brother and spoke up when she saw a way for her brother to survive. "Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?'" (Exodus 2:7). Sometimes a sister becomes another mother figure and watches and speaks up when we are in trouble.



I think of the Pharaoh's daughter, who knew that this child was supposed to die but took him in her arms and raised him as her own. "The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said" (Exodus 2:5-6). A mother figure can see us as a child in need and embraces us as one of her own.

My experience of motherhood has been one where I was pregnant and gave birth to my children. But there are so many other ways to be a mother figure. The women who surrounded Moses were mother figures who protected him, gave birth to him, and raised him. Being mother figures to this one child transformed their lives.

A new figure of motherhood

Both of my children have transformed my life beyond what I can express. When we embrace a new life, we are changed. My life changed, my work changed, and my body changed. I have a tattoo of the Venus of Willendorf, an ancient figure of fertility, femininity, and motherhood on my arm. I loved her regal stance and full embrace of her voluptuous body. Now my two-year-old daughter points to her and says, "that's you, Mommy." My body has transformed to look like this statue, and it has transformed into a new figure of motherhood.

Maybe we all transform when we become mothers. Whether it is our bodies or our hearts, we are transformed. Maybe we transform into fierce protectors, like Shiphrah and Puah, making sure patriarch power doesn't stop our children from living. Perhaps we are like Jochebed, giving our children their best chance in the world.

Maybe we are like Miriam, watchers who speak up when we see the opportunity for a child to survive. Perhaps we embrace children who come into our lives, like the Pharaoh's daughter, whether we gave birth to them or not.

What if being a mother figure transforms us as a community? All these women helped deliver Moses to his calling from God. There is not just one woman who saved him. There was a community. We are a community, transformed by those who were mother figures to us, and now we pass on that sacred wisdom to our children.

Discussion questions:

1. What does it mean to be a "mother figure"? Who were mother figures in your life?
2. Who are biblical women who you see as mother figures? What do they say to you about motherhood?
3. What communities have transformed you?

Closing prayer:

Mothering God, You are our fierce protector and hold us in the womb of your love. Thank you for giving us mother figures who transformed us throughout our lives. Guide our hearts, hands, and voices with your wisdom this day and every day. In your name, we pray, Amen.

Elyssa is a doctoral student in theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. She focuses on the theology of the body and sex. Alongside her studies, she is a poet and hobby baker. As a writer, Elyssa's poetry and blogging can be found at Café (boldcafe.org), The Mudroom, Naked and Unashamed, and We Talk, We Listen. She lives in Chicago with her husband, two children, and two cats.



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