

*Mother God*  
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*“To whom could you compare me?” says the Holy One. —  
Isaiah 40:25*

*God Almighty is our natural Father; God All-wisdom is our  
natural Mother.*  
—Julian of Norwich

Reading: Exodus 3:7-14

When I was a young man going to seminary, there was an associate minister at my home church, Westminster Presbyterian, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His name was Henry Jones, and he was well into his 80's at the time, so he had been around. And I'll always remember him telling me, “Son, your job as a minister is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

One of the things that I like about Rincon and about the United Church of Christ in general is that it is important to be *challenged*. And so this is not a place where one is going to receive The Answer but where one is given the tools to seek the answers for oneself. A church is a place not just to save souls but *to grow them*. And perhaps the highest compliment a preacher can get, I think, is when someone says “that made me think.” Our job is to help people set off on their own journey of reflection and self-discovery.

We grow too old for a lot of things: parenthood, jobs, and so forth. But we never are too old for the spiritual journey, to change and grow. One never retires from that.

So we should not expect to hear the Word of God from the pulpit. The only place one hears the Word of God is in one's heart. And my hope is not that you agree with me but that what I say helps you—pushes you—to search your own heart for God's Word.

My focus today is this: When we speak about God, what images are good? What language is right? This is a treacherous thing to do, since so often our

own agendas and self interests and prejudices get in the way. There's an old adage that has been traced back to Voltaire: "In the beginning God created human beings in God's image, and we have been returning the favor ever since."

There's a story about a member of the British Parliament who appeared one day at the Gates of Heaven and demanded entry.

*"Sorry, sir," said the admitting angel, "but sexism is a sin, and our records show you to be a real male chauvinist pig. There is no room for you here."*

*"Humph," said the MP, "I suppose you go that nonsense from Maggie Thatcher? I see here over there, gloating at me."*

*"More bad news, I'm afraid," said the angel. "That's not Mrs. Thatcher. That's God."*

Our cultural blindness and personal attitudes can lead us all into trouble and bad news if we are not careful.

A good place to start is to recognize *the limitations of all human language*. In the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, the prophet struggles to speak to a defeated and despairing people who found themselves in exile in Babylon. And there is a shocking reversal of the warrior image of God. Instead, God is compared to a shepherd who is most concerned for the weakest of the flock, the mothers and the babies:

*Like a shepherd he grazes his flock  
with his right arm he gathers the lambs  
to his breast he lifts them.  
The mother sheep he guides. (40:11)*

The image here is of God carrying people in their distress.

Then there is this series of rhetorical questions used to speak about the incomparable nature of God:

*Who meted out the waters with the cupped hand,  
and measured the heavens with the span?*

*Contained in a third cup the dust of the earth,  
and weighed in a scale the mountains,  
heights with balance weights? (40:12)*

The answer is obvious: It was God and nobody else. And then come some more questions:

*To whom then will you like God?  
And to what likeness will you compare God?*

*To whom shall you like me and I shall resemble?  
Says the Holy One.  
Lift your eyes on high  
and see who created these,  
bringing out their numerous hosts  
by name God called them all  
in great abundance of wondrous power;  
and no one is missing. (40:18, 25-26)*

Again, the answers to the questions are obvious: *God cannot be compared to anyone or anything.* Even the stars, worshipped as divine powers in Babylon, are recipients of God's care; God calls them all by name. God is not named; God does the naming.

God transcends human comprehension and the human capacity to render God in human language. Now, these are reassuring words, especially to a people who felt helpless, who have been carried off into a hard and cruel life of slavery and bondage.

In our passage from the book of Exodus, we have Moses being called to be a major part of the liberation of the Hebrew people. Moses resists, and he throws out one objection after another. And each time Moses objects, God has another task ready. Eventually, Moses becomes more blunt and pleads, "Send someone else." And finally Moses gives in, his resistance worn down.

One of his last objections that he throws out was this:

*When I come to Israel's children...  
and they ask me:*

*What is his name,  
What shall I tell them?*

*God said to Moses:  
“I will be who I will be.”*

Now the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible is translated into English as “I am who I am.” The Hebrew verb form used here, however, would be ordinarily translated with a future tense: “I will be” rather than “I am.”

But the implication here is that *it is impossible to name God*. God cannot be captured in a name. As Old Testament theologian, Johanna Bos writes:

*It was, for Moses, a good beginning point; it is a good beginning point for us. It is also a point of which we need to be reminded constantly; the only “wrong” naming of God is that which is sure of having it “right.”*

In the Hebrew scriptures, Israel used a proper name for God, which is transliterated with the four consonants, “YHWH,” usually translated as “LORD” in the English versions and as “LORD GOD” when found in combination with *Elohim*, the generic word, “God.” Ancient Israel’s practice was to write the name with consonants only, and at some time they stopped pronouncing the name of God, and only the consonants remained. This word occurs more than 6,000 times in the Bible. Jewish believers would not even entertain the notion of trying to pronounce the sacred name and find it deeply offensive and blasphemous when other attempt to do so. *Christians do well to remember that the proper name of God is unpronounceable*. Even our most precise and careful language of God is a wild approximation, an analog to the great Mystery and incomprehensible Reality.

And so the question is: If all speaking of God is flawed, then how do we speak of God? How does the Bible speak of God? Again, ancient Israel’s prohibition of visible representations of God testifies to any under of the danger of idolatry: *the identification of divine reality with human representation*. And since words also are created images, we need to be aware always that language for God is always language of *comparison* and not of *identification*. And so the Bible shows us the necessity for *many titles*

and images for God instead of identifying God with just one or a few images. For example, one of the comparisons of God in the Bible is to a father. But as theologian, Sallie McFague observes,

*By excluding other relationships as metaphors, the model of father become idolatrous, for it comes to be viewed as a description of God.*

And so there is a problem when we think that there is only one image for God.

Historically, the majority of Christianity, Judaism and Islam have used exclusively male language, so that this image of God has moved from *metaphor* to the status of *fact*. It has become literalized. And this masculine imagery has supported a definition of religious authority that excluded women and assigned them to subordinate status. Furthermore, this exclusive image of God alienates women from their own experience.

In the book, *Children's Letters to God*, a small girl named Sylvia wrote, "Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know that you are one, but try to be fair." Carol Christ writes,

*As long as a woman prays to a male God, she can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God.*

Make no mistake, *men* need the Mother image of God, too. Patriarchy affects us all. The assumption of male dominance, of a hierarchical view of things, of power over others, contributes to discord, violence and warfare. The idea of the nurturing, comforting Mother God is sorely needed. And mothering itself is beyond gender.

About a year ago I did a baptism for a little boy named Cooper. And we all saw in our congregation how he and his nine brothers were all receiving the beautiful mothering that they needed from their parents, Clint and Bryan. God as mother can help release us from the tyranny of cultural stereotypes and stunted human development. Real men are good mothers. Jesus was like that, comparing himself to a mother hen, saying, "O Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!"

Now I suppose some of you are thinking, “Steve, you’re preaching to the choir—we get it—God can be imaged as male or female.” But I want to push you all a little on this because these images are not just an intellectual thing; they are a visceral, soul thing. Do not underestimate the difficulty to overcome the power that our culture’s dominant religious images have over you. We do not overcome these patterns of thinking with sheer will power or a simple decision. It requires practice.

The Bible affirms many images of God, who is compared to a bear, a lion, a rock, a brook, a wall, and a mountain. And, appropriate on Mother’s Day, God is compared to many feminine images as well!

Beginning with the writer of Genesis: “God created humankind in God’s image... male *and female* God created them.” (1:27)

There is the image of God as the *mother eagle*, emphasizing speed, strength and protection, as she would swoop down and catch her young:

*As an eagle stirs her nest  
over her young hovers,  
spread her wing, take them up,  
carried them on her pinions.* (Deuteronomy 32:11)

The Hebrew word, *ruach*, means “breath,” “wind,” and when linked to God is translated “spirit,” and it has a feminine gender, describing the life-giving and empowering experience of God. *Shekinah*, who, in Judaism, was the indwelling presence of God in humankind, and often called the feminine face of God.

There is also the image of God as *Wisdom*. *Sophia* is the Greek word for wisdom, and she appears as a female figure in the Hebrew Scriptures in Proverbs and Job. “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace,” says Proverbs 3:17.

And finally, there is the image of God as *a mother*:

*Like a woman in labor I scream,  
I gasp and strain all at once.* (Isaiah 42:13)

*Can a woman forget her infant?  
A compassionate other the child of her body?  
Yes. Even these may forget,  
but I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49:15)*

*As a mother comforts a man  
so I will myself comfort you. (Isaiah 66:13)*

How appropriate it is that we have a civil holiday that has its roots in disarmament to counter the bloody violence we have projected upon God. In 1870 Julia Ward Howe, famous for writing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” issued a proclamation that is included in your bulletin that began our Mother’s Day observance. It is a response to the carnage of the Civil War and an eloquent call for peace and for nonviolent conflict resolution “in the name of womanhood and of humanity.” A generation later Anna Jarvis helped establish it as an official national holiday. (Jarvis would later regret this as she saw the holiday become lost in commercialism.)

We celebrate the caring and nurturing of human life that is, of course, not gender specific. But since women have been assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us first know love and tenderness in the person of a woman.

Because of this, “mother” is a powerful metaphor for God! The phrase, “a face only a mother could love,” points to the unconditional dedication of God toward humanity. In her book, *She Who Is*, New Testament scholar, Elizabeth Johnson, writes:

*The compassion of God the Mother insures that she loves the weak and dispossessed as well as the strong and beautiful. We don not have to be wonderful according to external norms to elicit her love, for this is freely given by virtue of the maternal relationship itself. God looks upon all with a mother’s love that makes the beloved beautiful. Human persons cannot earn or merit this love, but it is freely and abundantly given.*

It has been noted that the word translated as “compassion” in the Hebrew, is the plural form of the word for “womb.” So compassion—literally, “to feel with”—means feeling the feeling of someone else in a visceral way. According to the writer of Jeremiah, God says,

*Is Ephraim my dear son? My darling child?  
For the more I speak of him,  
the more I do remember him.  
Therefore my womb trembles for him;  
I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him. (31:20, trans. Phyllis  
Trible)*

Motherly-compassion is central to the deity.

Isabella Brett was born into slavery at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Later she was nicknamed Sojourner Truth. She was a woman far ahead of her time, and her efforts to make peace in her world focused on the abolition of slavery and the rights of women. In 1852 she attended a Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, and she remained quiet for hours as opponents of women's rights, particularly the clergy, brought forth reason after reason for the inferiority of women—especially arguments that women are naturally weaker than men, that Christ was not a woman, and that Eve was responsible for the fall of Adam, and through him, the entire human race.

She finally arose and took the podium and delivered her famous “Ain't I A Woman” speech.

*That man there say that women need to be helped into carriages and  
lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody  
ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or give me any  
best place! And ain't I a woman?*

Baring her arm to the shoulder to demonstrate her muscles, she continued,

*Look at me! I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns—and  
no man could head me—ain't I a woman?*

The crowd cheered and encouraged Sojourner. To the objection that women were inferior because Christ was a man, she said,

*Where did Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from?  
From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him!*

The audience was overwhelmed. Pandemonium broke loose.

Friends, let us not limit God. Let us use the full spectrum and broad array of images to convey the majesty of the Unnamable God.

In the name of the one God, Mother of us all.

### **Mothers' Day Proclamation: Julia Ward Howe, Boston, 1870**

Mother's Day was originally started after the Civil War, as a protest to the carnage of that war and a call to women to unite for disarmament. Its roots have been lost in a sea of sentimentality. Here is the original Mother's Day Proclamation.

*Arise, then, women of this day!  
Arise, all women who have hearts,  
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!*

*Say firmly:*

*“We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies;  
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and  
applause.*

*Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn*

*All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.*

*We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country*

*To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”*

*From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own.*

*It says: “Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of  
justice.”*

*Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession.*

*As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war,*

*Let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest  
day of counsel.*

*Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.*

*Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means*

*Whereby the great human family can live in peace,*

*Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,*

*But of God.*

*In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask*

*That a general congress of women without limit of nationality*

*May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient*

*And at the earliest period consistent with its objects,*

*To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,*

*The amicable settlement of international questions,*

*The great and general interests of peace.*