

“Like a Woman in Childbirth”

Reading: John 3:1-8; Isaiah 42:1-14

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One of the accusations often leveled against religious people is that they invent their own gods in their own image. It's an old argument going back to ancient times in one form or another. And in a lot of cases it's true; people are notorious for convincing themselves that their god is accepting of whatever they want to do; that their god thinks like them and might even act and look like them. If you're aggressive and militaristic, it's not hard to come up with a god who shares your values. If you're gentle and generous, then surely those are the sorts of things your god wants from you. If social mores change and some behaviors become acceptable or unacceptable, then eventually you'll be able to find a holy person who can argue that your god now agrees, or has always thought that way and no one realized it. Life's just easier when you can justify your beliefs by saying that your god agrees.

Of course our claim as Christians is the exact opposite: our claim is that God created us in His image, not the other way around. We can debate how successfully we've lived up to that claim or how accurate it is to claim that we're different than other religions, but that's our claim. It's a powerful claim. God is not like us; we are not the standard to which God is compared. On the contrary, God is the standard to which we are compared, and, hopefully, we are like God, not the other way around.

We come at that claim from a slightly unusual direction today. In one of our Sunday school classes a few weeks ago I mentioned in sort of an offhand way that there are a number of passages in the Bible that apply female images to God, where God is described using feminine imagery, and I wasn't really trying to do anything other than make whatever point I was making at the time, but the more I thought about it the more I thought it would be worth exploring that point in more detail. It's not just some obscure bit of trivia of no real consequence, it's something that informs our understanding of God and ourselves. In the interest of full disclosure, much of my information is coming from a book called "Liberating Tradition" by Dr. Kristina LaCelle-Peterson, a professor at Houghton College.

We focus on two passages in particular today, but there are many others we'll touch on as well. Throughout the latter part of this summer we've been listening to the sermons of the Old Testament prophets, and again today we hear some of the proclamations of Isaiah. The relevant passage for us today is the last one we read, where God says this: "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." In the verse right before that, Isaiah describes God as a "champion" and a "warrior" who "will raise the battle cry and will triumph over His enemies." In the space of two verses we see God described using stereotypically masculine imagery and overtly female imagery. It's not just "feminine" imagery, however we might define that, and it's not just imagery that challenges our notions of masculinity and power, like the description a few verses earlier of the Lord's chosen one as someone who will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick because He's so gentle. No, this is clearly female imagery, describing God in terms of something only women can do: giving birth.

Especially in the Old Testament we tend to think of God described in more masculine terms. The first person of the Trinity is known as God the Father, and that comes not only from the language of Jesus but from all kinds of images in the Old Testament. God is often described as a father, a husband, or a king. But while it's not exactly common in the Bible for God to be described using female images, it's far from unheard of, if you're paying attention. We also read part of John 3, that famous passage that goes on to give us one of the most famous verses in the entire Bible, John 3:16. But the lead-up to John 3:16 gives us another familiar phrase, to be "born again," the favorite description of salvation among Evangelicals.

It's a phrase we so often use without really thinking of the implications of it. We tend to think of being born again as describing the total life change involved in salvation; it's as though you're starting an entirely new life from scratch. And that's true, but it misses the implication of the one giving birth: God, again described in female imagery. Jesus describes it as being born of the Spirit because Jesus is the giver of the Spirit, and so He emphasizes the Spirit's active role in salvation. But it's not enough to say that the Spirit is the feminine side of God and the Father is the masculine side, not just because God is one, but also because those feminine images are hardly restricted to the Spirit.

In the book of Job, in chapter 38 as God is giving Job an answer, God describes the act of creation in terms of giving birth to the sea and to the ice. God is described as giving birth to Israel in Deuteronomy 32 and Isaiah 46. God is described as a nursing mother in Isaiah 49, 1 Peter 2, and Psalm 131. God is like a comforting mother in Isaiah 66 and in Luke 13, as Jesus stands over Jerusalem and laments its fate. God is described as the mistress of a household in Psalm 123:2, and as a midwife in Psalm 22:9. God is the woman searching for a lost coin in Luke 15, and the woman working yeast into dough in Luke 13. Again, it's not a dominant theme of Scripture, but the writers of Scripture (and God Himself) do not shy away from it.

Why do we get uncomfortable with this sort of thing? Maybe because masculine imagery and language is entrenched in our understanding of God. God is our father, and Jesus is our brother, and while Jesus is clearly physically male, we also tend to picture God the Father as, well, a grandfatherly, regal male. And so it's a bit awkward since we have limited pronouns to work with in English; a person is either a him or a her, and if you want to avoid gender you could go with "it," but that's usually referred for things that aren't people. Avoiding pronouns altogether is cumbersome, so our default is usually male, even though we know God is neither male nor female. Maybe we're uncomfortable because many Christians are wary of the excesses of feminism in recent decades, and we don't want to stray too far in that direction. Maybe it's due to the fact that so many cultures have equated womanhood with shame and weakness, and we don't think women fully bear the image of God. But the Bible shows us there's nothing shameful, heretical, or embarrassing about female imagery applied to God.

So why does this matter? What's the point of drawing attention to this? Because God created us — *all* of us — in God's image, and we too often forget that. It's not that God reflects us back to ourselves; God is not made in our image. Dr. LaCelle-Peterson quotes Mary Daly as saying that "if God is male, then male is God." We have too often reinforced the notion that God is male, or at least mostly masculine, both implicitly and explicitly. And by doing so we have told literally half of humans that they do not quite bear the image of God as fully as men do. So while that certainly has

implications for the roles women can play in the life of the church and in society, more than that it's a message to us that the image of God is present in everyone. It's a message to us that there is no one who is inherently unable to reflect God's grace and participate in God's kingdom. Some people may, through their own choices, dull that reflection of God's image and put dents in it and even work to destroy it, but no one is born without it or with a lesser measure of it. Because it's not only women that we quietly, subtly exclude from being full image-bearers of God, is it? We make assumptions about people based on their heritage or skin color or nationality or whatever, and think they just can't be as fully included in God's kingdom as people like me can.

But no, hear the good news: we were all created in God's image, and however much you or anyone else has done to mess up that image, the invitation is open through the work of Jesus Christ for everyone to be brought back to their full luster and beyond, to reflect the glory of God through their lives, to fully bear witness to the grace of God, to fully participate in the work of God's kingdom, and to be adopted into God's family as full co-heirs of the kingdom with Christ. God does not hesitate to reach out in love to those He has created. Neither should we.

So today as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, the table is open to you as an invitation. Through Jesus Christ, God has given Himself for you, so that God's image in you might be fully restored to glory.



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