

Sermon on 6 Pentecost C: Isaiah 66:7-14

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on July 8, 2007, by Pastor David Van Kley

Yahweh our Mother, Kind and Good

Long before I had visited the Minnesota northwoods or tasted a beer, I loved the Hamm's Beer commercials on TV and radio broadcasts. There was a lovable bear and a catchy jingle: "from the land of sky blue waters—waters—comes the water best for brewing—brewing. Hamm's the Beer refreshing. Hamm's the beer refreshing. Hamm's." Even more than the commercials, I liked the lighted signs at restaurants and bowling alleys. Always, it seemed, there was a roaring stream or a rippled lake, framed by majestic pines and a cloudless blue sky. But the best part was that the signs were animated by some sort of 1960's technology, so you could literally see the waters rolling over boulders or the waves pushing across the lake. I was totally fascinated.

Later, after our family began to take vacations in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, those signs took on new meaning. When I'd see one, I would be magically transported 400 miles to the north. I could almost *smell* the pines in a damp forest. I could almost *feel* the pull of a fish at the end of my fishing line. My first love was not a woman—sorry, Arlene—but a place. Such is the power of images.

Most of what we believe about God is conveyed through images. *No one* has ever seen God, except perhaps Moses, who—according to the Bible—caught a glimpse of God's "backside." No one has ever really seen God, which is why we turn to Jesus' words and works to show us what God is like. But of course, we can't see *Jesus*, either, at least not in the flesh. Our paintings of Jesus are only guesses and probably bad ones at that. So we carry around pictures of Jesus in our head, based on the stories of the Bible.

We are only human and as such, we *need* pictures of God upon which to hang our trust. So we speak of God as father. We begin our prayers with "*Father God*" or "*Heavenly Father*." A strange thing to say, when you think about it, for God is clearly not a father in the same way that I am or many of you are! Yet, it is a way for us to picture God. God is *like* a father. So Jesus teaches: when you pray, say "Our Father"...

But there are other images of God in Scripture. God is our dwelling place. The rock of our salvation. Our refuge and strength. A King, robed in majesty! A Shepherd. Water from a rock in a thirsty land.

And then this: God is like a *mother*. It's there in today's Old Testament lesson, clear as can be. "As a mother comforts a child, so I will comfort you," says the Lord.

The whole passage is *full* of feminine imagery! First, God appears as a midwife, who helps a mother deliver a baby. The mother is the old city of Jerusalem ruined by war; the baby is Israel, returned from exile. The image speaks to me: our first child was born with the help of a midwife, the wise, reassuring, competent, and strong woman who helped Arlene and I give life to Emily. *God* is like that!

In the text, after giving birth, Jerusalem acts the part of a mother, nursing her people from a consoling breast, carrying them on her arms, bouncing them on her knees. I think of the bridesmaid I saw nursing her child at Karlie Jackl's wedding a couple of weeks ago. Such a peaceful sight, mother and child looking adoringly into each other's eyes. This is what the new Jerusalem will be like, Isaiah told the people! Jerusalem will shelter and nurture you! You will adore her!

But in the end, it's not quite enough to say that Jerusalem is a mother and God a midwife. "As a mother comforts her child, so *I* will comfort you," says the Lord.

Perhaps you remember. A few weeks after Pastor Kent came to us, he referred to God as *She* while ending a sermon. I expected to hear about that. One woman did not disappoint: "Did he say what I *think* he said?"

"What?"

"Did he say that God was a *woman*?"

I said, "Well, you know, he *is* young..." I'd been waiting for the chance to say that! But then I also said, "Do you think God is a *man*?"

"*Jesus* was," she said.

"Yes. But God, the creator of all things, who sent Jesus into the world, do you think *God* is a man, with a beard? God is neither male nor female, because God is way *more* than male or female. We only speak of God as being *like* a father. So we could speak of God as being *like* a mother, too."

"Oh," she said. "I suppose that's right."

God is *like* a mother. It's only an image, like the Hamm's Beer sign, to help us understand and believe in the God no one has ever seen. Yet people resist this image. At the synod assembly, someone introduced a resolution that pastors *only* refer to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in worship. No other images allowed, especially not what one pastor called "all this feminist stuff."

But it's in the *Bible*! Not as often as God the Father, but it's there, not only in this text, but in others. Might it be there for a reason?

When I was a kid, I went on adventures with my Dad. He took me fishing. He brought me to Wrigley Field to watch the Cubs. He taught me to throw a baseball and catch a football. From my Dad, I also learned to love words. But if I was hurting, if I needed a Band-Aid, whom do you suppose I ran to? Not my Dad! My dad would probably say, "get over it!" But *Mom* would wipe away the dirt, apply Bactine or Mercurochrome, and bandage my wounds.

Similarly, if I had done something wrong and needed a word of forgiveness, whom did I seek? Not Dad! Dad was not very understanding of mistakes. I would go to mom, who would lecture me, but then forgive and bless me.

I know these are stereotypes. Maybe it was—or is—different in your house. Today, more Dads are gentle and nurturing and more Moms are strong and adventuresome and I think that's good, but still: if as a four year old, you had just cut yourself and were crying your eyes out, to whom would you run?

During the time of Isaiah, Israel needed a God they could run to. They were returning after years of captivity in a foreign land, to a city that lay in ruins. They knew that, as a people, they had brought destruction upon themselves by their unjust and godless ways. They were a wounded people, in need of healing. They needed God to comfort them as a mother comforts her child.

Sometimes we hurt in this same way. We mourn people we loved with all our heart. We suffer through divorces, which we have helped to cause. The doctor shows us X-rays which verify our worst fears. We file for bankruptcy, knowing that we spent too much of what we did not have. We fall out of trees we should not have climbed.

At such times, we don't need a thundering God who waves the commandments at us. We don't need a warrior God to drown Pharaoh's hosts in the Red Sea. We need a God we can run to. A God who will reach out and hold us, dandle us on a knee, comfort us at the breast. Who will look into our eyes and whisper our names.

When I think of God, I sometimes remember the time I—the adventuresome Dad—taught our son, Nick, how to ride a bike. He wasn't getting it, exactly. So I took him up on the big hill beside our house, and pointed him down the gravel-filled alley. Look, I said. "When I push you, pedal for all your worth—and you'll stay upright." Well, I did and he did. The problem was that when he reached the bottom of the hill, he had no idea how to stop the bike. But his mother was at the bottom of the hill. She stepped in front of him to absorb the blow and break his fall. *She* ended up with all kinds of cuts and bruises. But our son was safe.

I can think of few images in my life that speak so truly of the cross. God absorbing the blow, breaking our fall. God saving us from ourselves. And I did not see this in a father, but in a mother.

You know, for thousands of years, society has been tilted in favor of **men**. This has resulted in all kinds of injustice against women, including violence. I fear that religion has had a hand in perpetuating this violence. But God created both male and female in God's own image! And if that is so, doesn't it stand to reason that God himself would have characteristics of *both* women *and* men?

As humans, we need images of God on which to hang our trust. Sometimes it's really good to think of God as a loving father and sometimes as a loving mother. They're *both* in the Bible, you know! Amen.