

“An Unusual yet Helpful Image of God”

Luke 13:31–35

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In an old issue of the comic strip *Non Sequitur*, a robed dog with a halo, which looks like a German Shepherd to me, stands behind a heavenly lectern in the clouds as a small balding man looks on in bewilderment. The dog says, “Well, yes... considering you people have been spelling my name backward all this time, I imagine this would come as a bit of a surprise to you...”

It may seem irreverent. Is God really a dog? Well, is God really a human being? Theologians like Paul Tillich have addressed this concern with language such as Ground of Being, but it seems cold and impersonal. Perhaps Spirit has broader appeal but, in the final analysis, no single name or image satisfies all concerns. Images of God are just that — images. Equating any image of God with God is idolatry.

Scripture uses many different images to point to a God who is ultimately beyond human comprehension. We need all of these images to help us avoid the temptation toward idolatry and to broaden our perspective. In today’s reading from Luke, Jesus uses an unusual image that we might not have considered but one that is helpful.

Some Pharisees have warned Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. We don’t know whether they are genuinely concerned or trying to get him out of town, but Jesus will not be frightened away. He says to tell that fox Herod — a derogatory term, foxes ruined vineyards and were considered devious; Richard Vinson says we might say, tell that yappy-dog Herod — tell him Jesus isn’t leaving until he finishes his work.

Then, Jesus offers lament for his people. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

We should not assume that Jesus is criticizing all Jewish people for rejecting the messengers God sends, only the key leaders. Nor should we smugly look down on them for not listening to prophets. We don’t fare much

better. Jesus is simply naming reality and anticipating his death, and then he expresses his deep feelings for the city with an image of a mother hen.

It is an image for Jesus, but since he is an embodiment of the Divine, it is also an image for God. God is like a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. It is an unusual image yet one that is helpful.

One thing to note, perhaps the most obvious thing, is that this is a feminine image. The vast majority of traditional images for God have been masculine, which is not surprising in a patriarchal society, so much so that people function as if God really is exclusively male, an old-white guy with a beard. And the assumption of many good Baptists is that this simply reflects reality and the clear teaching of scripture, and thus any other teaching, particularly about God as feminine, is just wide-eyed, modern-day liberalism!

But Jesus presents an image of God as a mother hen, and this is not the only feminine image for God in scripture. Hosea 11 speaks of God bowing down to lift Israel to her cheek, as a nurturing mother. And in Christian tradition, many of the great mystics have found help in feminine images. Building on the work of twelfth-century Cistercian, William of St. Thierry, fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich developed a doctrine of God our Mother.

Many people want to hold on to the image of God as Father, and that is fine. It is an ancient image. We just need to be careful not to equate the image with God which, as we have said, is not only idolatry, but it also limits our understanding. The Holy One who is beyond all names and images is like Dr. Seuss's Cat in the Hat who keeps saying, "But that is not all I can do, no, no, that is not all!" There is ever more to God than we can know. No single image can suffice, and there is particular value in the feminine, partly because some people have terrible human fathers and thus male imagery can present a barrier to faith, and partly because there are so many wonderful qualities we consider to be feminine. We have lived with predominantly male images for nearly 2,000 years and look at where this has gotten us. It is time we embrace feminine images.

Another thing to note about the image Jesus presents is that it is an image of a God who shelters, cares for, and protects. It is similar to the image of shepherd with which we are familiar. Psalm 23 describes God as a

shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters, and restores our soul. In John 10, Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Today's psalm, Psalm 27, says that God will hide us and shelter us in a day of trouble.

So, this concept of a sheltering God is not restricted to the image of mother hen, nor is it necessarily feminine. Even among birds, fathers and mothers help care for the young. Like many people who live in our part of Raleigh, Dana and I have been watching the bald eagles around Shelley Lake. One pair have 2 young eaglets in the nest. The eaglets can be seen with binoculars or a powerful camera lens, but the parents can be seen with the naked eye because they are huge and intimidating sitting on the limb next to the nest, peering out as if to say, "Just try to mess with our children!" But both eagle parents, male and female, help with the parenting, providing food and protection.

God is like this, Jesus says, God is like a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings, like eagle parents protecting their young. God seeks to gather all of God's children under God's protective care, providing nurture. It is a wonderful image, again a departure from the predominant images many have used over the years of God as warrior or judge, the one who conquers through force and condemns the unfaithful.

How well have those images of God and a certain kind of power served us over time? They have led to inquisitions and crusades. They have fueled racism and xenophobia. Many people dismiss all religious ideas, including images of God, as being inane and harmless. It is an uninformed perspective. What people believe about God has a profound effect on how they live. The image of a warlike God leads to warlike people. How might claiming the image of God as a mother hen shift not only our thinking but our way of life and our view of power?

One other thing we might note about this image Jesus presents is that we see here a God who desperately longs for the people's wellbeing but is repeatedly frustrated to the point of exasperation. "How often have I desired to gather your children together..." Jesus says, "and you were not willing!" Why would the people resist God's efforts to help? Why do we? But they do,

as do we, and somewhere within the heart of God there is a deep aching for a different outcome.

It's like what we feel when we want the best for our children and they make other choices. It's like we have felt throughout this pandemic. It's like we feel at many different places in life. We long for the best, we don't experience it, and we feel utter frustration.

In the brief story we have read from Luke 13, the God who was in Christ experiences this feeling. Again, this goes against the predominant view of God as all-powerful, the one in total control of everything. But can we look at the Holocaust and argue that God is in control of everything? Can we consider what is happening in Ukraine and believe God is in control of everything? Can we account for racial injustice and religious persecution and think God is in control of everything? Unless we believe in a capricious and sociopathic god, we cannot.

God may be all-powerful, but God is also all-loving, and in giving us the freedom to choose, an act of sacrificial love, God limits God's self and lives with the consequences of our decisions, which is why there is aching in God's heart. It continues all the way to the cross where God ultimately overcomes all of our poor choices, and this is an act of supreme power, but it is a different kind of power from a different kind of God.

If there is any comfort in this image, it may seem like a strange kind of comfort. But this is the God we love and serve — a God who enters this world in the form of a fragile child, a God who lives among the poor and outcast, a God who dies a painful and humiliating death. This God may not miraculously change the world for our benefit, but this God will do everything possible to help us, short of taking away our freedom to choose; this gentle, mother-hen of a God will be with us when we suffer, sheltering us, and feeling what we feel, until the day arrives when there is no more frustration, there is no more suffering, there are no more tears. That is a comforting reality.