

“God Is Such a Disappointment”

Bill Chadwick First Presbyterian Church,
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Psalm 27 Luke 13:31-35

I would like us this morning to think together briefly about this “mother hen” image and then look at the overall theme of God’s protection.

In seminary, most professors opened each class with prayer. So, on my first day of classes in my first year at San Francisco Theological Seminary in the fall of 1974 I took a seat in my Introduction to Old Testament class. After Professor Chaney introduced himself, he said, “Let us pray.” We all bowed our heads and shut our eyes. He began, “O God, our Father and Mother...” My head shot up, my eyes flew open, and I looked around. Everyone else was still in an attitude of prayer.

That was just the first of many mind-expanding experiences that initial year of seminary. Another memorable one was four days later. I had been invited to a party hosted by a classmate over in married student housing. As the door opened to let me in, I was met with a haze of smoke, which filled the room. And no, it was not cigarette smoke. Not legal cigarettes. In seminary! I was a 21-year-old Midwestern farm boy coming straight from a college that only a few years earlier had begun to allow dancing. I thought, “Well, Toto, we’re not in Minnesota anymore.”

Back to “God our Mother.” My very FIRST all-time favorite book in the world, not just in the Bible, is the Gospel of Luke. If you haven’t read it, I highly recommend it. Why is it my favorite? Well, there is the obvious information about Jesus, but why Luke over any of the other gospels? First, because it is written for non-Jews and thus is a little easier to understand for us goyim. Second, it has such wonderful stories of Jesus’ compassion, and it is the only gospel containing the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Third, it has *feminine* images for God, including the Parable of the Lost Coin, in which Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a woman searching diligently for a lost coin. Just so, God searches for “lost” people. And, of course, today’s lesson, in which Jesus’ likens himself to a mother hen.

Now, before I arrived at seminary, I had read the entire Bible. Well, except for the book of Ezekiel. I just couldn’t get through it, and still can’t. All that apocalyptic imagery. I was not a drug user—still am not, to be clear—and to this day I think that the book of Ezekiel probably only makes sense if you are high. Despite having read through 65 of the books of the Bible, somehow the feminine images for God had never made it into my consciousness. But, as I learned in seminary, they are there in Genesis, Deuteronomy, Hosea, Isaiah, Luke and other places.

So, my learning about God as “mother,” as feminine, during seminary, struck me as a powerful and helpful image for all of us in our worship of God. Thus, I was eager to share these insights with my first congregation, this one. So, early in 1978 I preached a sermon about God as female. Of course, I said that God is beyond all our images for God. I merely suggested that expanding beyond “God the Father” might be a helpful thing.

It was an enlightening moment for some in the congregation and the reaction to it was an enlightening experience for me. Following the service, I was greeting folks at the door and a number of people thanked me for that thought-provoking sermon. But that was not a unanimous reaction. That morning was when I first became aware of the power that people give to the preacher. One parishioner, an older widow, whose name I can no longer recall, came up to me with venom in her eyes and hissed, “You’ve ruined my idea of God.”

I felt horrible! Horrible! At the same time, I was dumbfounded! I thought. “You’re 75 years old. I’m 25. What do I know? Don’t pay any attention to me, if it’s going to upset you.”

Now, “God the Father” is for me personally, a wonderful image, because I had a Hall of Fame father, a man who was gentle and wise and loving and kind. But, of course, that’s not always the case. A parishioner in another congregation told me that her father was physically abusive to her. Thus, every time a pastor, or anyone else, prayed, “Heavenly Father...” she tightened up. The use of that metaphor engendered in her fear and hatred toward God.

Again, the reality of God is beyond male or female. The reality of God is far beyond any and all words that we can use to try to describe God. I believe it is helpful, and faithful to the Bible, to use more metaphors than "God the Father." So, I have throughout my ministry tried to use a variety of words to describe God... and Jesus. Not just "Father," "Lord," "King" but "Mother," "Great Physician," "Gentle Shepherd," "O Holy One," "Loving God."

Can you suggest some others?

Shifting gears. God's protection.

Psalm 27: *"When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes shall stumble and fall....For (God) will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;"*

There is a powerful story that has made its way among sermon illustration collections for many years. It is the story of a missionary family who has come to evangelize among some society that has never heard of Jesus. Somehow the local folks take offense and word comes to the missionary family that warriors are on the way to their home to murder them. The family falls to its knees and begins to pray for God to save them. They can see the warriors surrounding the house, but the men do not attack. All night long the missionaries pray for God's protection for them. Morning finds them safe, their would-be attackers gone. Some months later the indigenous folks are converted to Christianity. The missionary family then asks them why the warriors never attacked them that night.

They replied, "We didn't attack because of the men surrounding your house."

"What men?"

"*'What men!?' Your house was surrounded by fierce, heavily armed warriors, eight feet tall. We didn't attack because we were afraid! Who were those men?!'*"

And then the missionaries understood. They had been protected by God's angels.

I LOVE that story. I think it may well be factual. There is more to this life than what we can see.

Our Lenten theme for today is "'Full to the Brim: Under God's Wing"

Reflecting on the gospel passage and Psalm 27, the authors of this worship material write:

"God is our refuge. There is nothing that ...could keep God from gathering you in, protecting you fiercely. ... God will run to protect us."

Horsehockey! I wish these words were true. But for every story like that missionary family being protected, there are a hundred cases in which the missionaries were not protected. They were murdered. Seventy per-cent of Ukrainians are Christian. They are not being protected by God.

Hence, the strange title for the sermon: "God is such a disappointment."

There *are* cases in which God does provide protection, perhaps many more than we know. The fact that the world has not flamed out in a nuclear conflagration despite some of the unstable leaders of nuclear nations, present and past, is perhaps because the hand of God has stayed the hands on the nuclear buttons.

But how many times has God NOT protected us or our loved ones? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran nuns...

Theology matters. It is vitally important that we teach our children and any followers of Jesus how this discipleship stuff works.

When I was a chaplain, there was an elderly resident in the senior building who was going through the trials of the very old. In and out of the hospital with one medical ailment after another. He railed, "I have been a faithful Christian all my life! I am a Presbyterian elder! I am a tither! Why is this happening to me?!"

Clearly, he was not taught well by his pastors.

Contrary to some biblical passages, God is often frightfully short on protection. The clearest example that following Jesus is NOT the way to health and riches and worldly success, as the prosperity gospel heretics claim, is simply to look at the first disciples. Leaving aside Judas, tradition tells us that ten of the other eleven were martyred. As my friend John Schramm likes to say, "Before

you start to follow Jesus, you'd better be sure you look good on wood."

Again, it is vitally important that we teach our children and any followers of Jesus how this discipleship stuff works.

I know of a young woman who grew up in a Christian family. During her childhood she had one heartfelt request of God, which she prayed day after day, month after month, for years. She was not asking for a pony. It was a request for something very key to her identity and sense of self. God never said Yes to that request. She wants nothing to do with God today. Somehow her parents and her church did not make it clear that God is not a vending machine that grants our requests, no matter how worthy.

We'll talk more about this in the adult ed class on prayer today and next Sunday.

William Sloane Coffin perhaps phrased it best, as he so often did, "God provides minimum protection, maximum support."

Experience shows that God usually does not save us from the horrors of life, in this life.

he so often did, "God provides minimum protection, maximum support." Our faith is that God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. And beyond.

Back to the beginning of this Luke passage. The Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. Some good Pharisees. Jesus replies, in so many words, "Go and tell that fox that I will be about my work of healing and teaching and casting out demons as long as I need to." Jesus' words reflect the disdain he held for Herod. Jesus is in charge, and the Herods of the world have no power over him until the appointed time. And even then, despite the Cross, despite Jesus' murder, the Herods have no *ultimate* power over him.

Maybe God isn't so disappointing after all.

Ultimately, the victory is God's. We know who wins. Let us align ourselves with the sort of love, the sort of power, that even death cannot conquer.

Amen? Amen!