

Mothering God, mothering nature

- Friends, this week finds us at the convergence of a couple themes that might be at the forefront of our attention
 - On the one hand, we've been exploring the past few weeks our relationships with nature, and how our faith might call us to recognize the sacredness of nature and also to develop loving, Spirit-centered relationships with nature
 - And on the other hand—today is Mother's Day!
 - Today, as with each second Sunday of May for the last hundred years or so, we focus particularly on honoring and uplifting the mothers in our lives and the blessings of motherhood in our world at large
- And so leading up to this week I've been thinking about where these two focuses together might lead us
 - The sacred and spiritual side of our relationships with nature, and our opportunity to uplift and celebrate mothers and motherhood—where might those ideas intersect?
 - Well, one fruit of that intersection is the way we might encounter the motherhood of nature, which opens the door to notions of “Mother Earth” or “Mother Nature”
 - Our focuses this week might invite us to consider together—do these concepts like “Mother Earth” or “Mother Nature” fit within our Christian spiritual framework?
- Now if you take that question and present it to Google, like I did out of curiosity of course, the answers quickest to the front are generally in agreement with a pretty resounding “no,” suggesting (often with a large serving of disdain) that those sorts of ideas run counter to our faith tradition or are inconsistent or incompatible with our faith tradition

- And of course, in a certain perspective, that's true
 - If we consider "Mother Earth" or "Mother Nature" to be a personified or deified entity outside of the God of scripture, well that would indeed pretty quickly lead towards a polytheism that would stretch the boundaries of our faith tradition
 - And if we examine scripture for that kind of an independent entity in nature, well we might come up empty-handed
- But is that where the story ends?
 - Maybe not
- In considering where these questions might take us, I've been thinking this week about the work of Elizabeth Johnson, one of the most influential living theologians in the Catholic tradition who is currently serving as the Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theology at Fordham University
 - One aspect of Johnson's work is an exploration of the ways we talk about God in metaphor
 - Johnson points out that, because God is infinite and so far beyond our human understanding, pretty much all of the ways that we talk about God are through metaphors
 - We come to understand some particular aspect of divinity through similarities with more worldly and simple ideas
 - We might say "God is our shepherd" even though God is not literally a shepherd
 - The shepherd metaphor helps us to understand certain aspects of who God is for us, who Christ is for us

- Even the ways of talking about God that feel the most basic and fundamental often boil down to metaphors—like the title, “Lord,” for instance
 - “Lord” is a metaphor that can help us talk about and understand certain aspects of God by recognizing similarities between the human relationships of lord and subjects
- God is infinitely beyond our full understanding, impossible to fully contain or describe with words
 - But the metaphors we use to talk about God help us to build up our understanding
- And within this array of metaphors that help us to talk about and understand God, Elizabeth Johnson suggests that certain metaphors have come to be seen as most important or most essential, to the unfortunate exclusion and denial of others
 - The ways that we use metaphors to talk about God can then start to limit our understanding of God rather than broaden it; if a certain idea about God doesn’t fit with our preferred metaphor about God, well we just outright reject that different idea
- Johnson suggests that our living faith calls on us to explore a diverse array of metaphors for the divine, to always be seeking new understandings of the divine, and to avoid erroneously thinking we’ve got it all figured out and shrinking God down to fit our most comfortable ways of talking about God
 - Johnson invites her reader to consider metaphors for God beyond the most common and well-worn ones—not just in creating new perspectives or metaphors, but also in rediscovering ways of talking about God in the scriptures that we might have been paying less attention to

- And so the question of the day through the perspective of Elizabeth Johnson's work might be to ask, are concepts like "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth" useful metaphors for us to understand certain aspects of God?
 - Might these ideas help us to encounter aspects of the divine that we might have been neglecting or not seeing?
- We can start by looking to scripture to see how metaphors of mothering and motherhood might already be present there
 - Our scripture passage this morning comes from the Book of Job, from the section of that book in which God reminds Job of how vast and omnipresent and infinite God is, how little Job really understands about existence at the end of the day
 - In verses 8 and 29 of today's passage, we hear descriptions of God's creative present in the birth of the universe as being like a divine womb
 - "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb," and "From whose womb comes the ice," and "Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens," God asks
 - Or we might consider a verse like Psalm 145:9, which reads:
 - "The Lord is good to all, having compassion on all that God has made."
 - In that sort of translation, we hear God's love for all the universe and all those given life
 - We might even hear it generally as a parental sort of love
 - But what we don't hear in the English translation is that the word translated there as "compassion" is a form of the Hebrew word for "womb"—it might literally sound something

like “a womb-like quality,” rendering this verse something like:

- “The Lord is good to all; God has a womb-like quality towards all that God has made”

- We might consider also the words of Deuteronomy 32:18, which reads:
 - “You deserted the Rock, who bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.”
 - That verse calls us to turn back towards God through the metaphors of God as our mother
- And of course some of the names and titles of God throughout the scriptures reflect these kind of feminine or motherly ways of understanding aspects of the divine
 - Not just those that have a feminine gender in the language, like “ruach” the feminine word for “Spirit” in Hebrew and “pneuma” the feminine word for “Spirit” in Greek
 - But also those that are specifically descriptive of certain aspects of mothering
 - One title for God in scripture, for instance, is “el shaddai,” which is often translated “God almighty”
 - But the original and literal meaning of “el shaddai” is something like “God with breasts” or “many-breasted God,” a title used first in the book of Genesis repeatedly in connection to fertility
- The motherly ways of talking about and understanding God also lead us particularly into nature-mother perspectives as well
 - Turning again to those images in our morning’s passage from Job 38, we see how the imagery of birthing and wombs depicts these aspects of God not just as motherly in general, but specifically motherly in and through the natural world

- The womb that births the seas and the snows of heaven
- We might think also of the metaphors present in Deuteronomy 32:11, where God is described as a mother eagle that cares for and nurtures the young in her nest
- We might think of Matthew 23:37, in which God's relationship with the people of Jerusalem is described as being like a mother hen seeking to gather her chicks under her wing
- We might turn again to that verse of Deuteronomy 32:18:
 - "You deserted the Rock who bore you;
you forgot the God who gave you birth."
 - "The Rock who bore you" here is an image of the Rock as the source of the dust and clay that forms our bodies
 - The metaphor here invites us not just to see God as the mother who birthed us; we might further recognize the earth, the Rock around us and beneath our feet, as the mothering presence of God in nature that births us
 - Earth-as-mother or nature-as-mother being used as metaphors for God's relationship with us
- We might indeed shy away from "Mother Earth" or "Mother Nature" as entities distinct and separate from God, or Christ, or Spirit
 - But perhaps those ideas can serve us well as metaphors—as ways of talking about God and coming to understand certain aspects of God
 - Perhaps they might open the door for us to consider the all-too-neglected ways we might think of God as our Mother, our divine Mother present in the nature the surrounds us
- And so friends, on this Mother's Day, I'd like to invite us to try on some of those less familiar ways of talking about God in metaphor, to see where they might lead us

- As we uplift and honor the mothers in our lives today, how might we think about God as our divine Mother?
- As we experience the natural world we live in, how might we encounter the Mothering God immanent in nature?
- Mother Nature, Mother Earth—how might these ideas help us to broaden and deepen our understanding of the infinite and unknowable God?
- For now, let us pray together, asking, O God, that you open our minds and hearts to know you better each day
 - God, our language is so limited, and yet through word and metaphor we come to know you in glimmers of your infinite and radiant majesty
 - And God, on this day when our thoughts turn towards the mothers in our lives, we thank you for being our divine Mother
 - You gave us birth, gave us life, and shower us in compassion and nurture and care each day
 - God, we are blessed beyond words to be your beloved children—amen